

## **People waiting for Peace – Isaiah & Joseph**

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – Isaiah & Luke)

This week is the second week of Advent. This week we think about peace. December 10<sup>th</sup> is Human Rights Sunday, so it is fitting we think about peace.

The Psalmist says God speaks peace to the people. The angels announce – Glory to God, peace to people on earth. We understand that peace to be spoken to us in Jesus.

So, what is peace? Maybe it is just stillness or quietness or calmness. In that famous film 'The Castle' Daryl Kerrigan standing at Bonnie Doon says 'Ah, the serenity'. For some maybe it is simply the absence of conflict. John Lennon sang about it - Imagine there's no countries/It isn't hard to do/Nothing to kill or die for/And no religion, too/Imagine all the people/Living life in peace. Mother Teresa said 'Peace begins with a smile' and Martin Luther King Jr said - Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding." "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Gandhi said "The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace."

In our first reading today, Isaiah paints a picture of peace. A picture where people will not war with one another, in fact their weapons will be transformed into farming implements. A picture where traditional enemies will lie down together and share – wolves and lambs, calves and lions, cows and bears, lions and oxen. He also speaks of a time when justice and righteousness and peace will reign forever. How we long for such a time!

In our gospel reading we have a man looking for a quiet and peaceful life – Joseph. A man who finds himself in a painful dilemma. We know little about Joseph and he doesn't utter a word in the story. I imagine him to be the strong, silent type – strong shoulders and calloused hands from his work as a tradie. A good man we are told, his family descending from the line of David, religious therefore. Planning for a simple life, marriage to his betrothed Mary and then no doubt family and working to provide for them. The plans had begun, engagement then marriage. And then Mary comes to him with news, news that turns his world upside down, she is pregnant. He knows he is not the father. The law in this circumstance, would allow him to publicly shame her. Rather than marry her to do the opposite, divorce and shun her.

I wonder how he felt as she delivered this news that seemed to throw a spanner in the works. Confused and bewildered no doubt. Angry perhaps, disappointed certainly and no doubt deeply hurt. I wonder who he goes to for advice.

His solution to his dilemma is quite extraordinary. Initially entertaining the idea of divorce, he can't do it. He isn't looking for trouble, for scandal, to humiliate. It seems he loves Mary and can't abandon her, the child and her family and let them deal with the scandal. Rather it seems he draws on an inner strength and compassion and bends the rules – he will marry Mary and give her dignity not shame, he will do as the angel asks and give the child a 'legal' father. The assurance the angel offers him perhaps calms his fears, gives him a sense of internal peace.

Joseph takes the road to peace by doing the following.<sup>1</sup>

1. He courageously faces the facts – he weighs up whether he should stay or go. He doesn't act impulsively, he goes through the options, looking at the situation from all sides
2. He listens for the Word of God – which for him arrives in a dream as he goes through his decision-making processes
3. He follows the guidance he receives – once his decision is made, to take a more human course of action, he acts even though he might lose his reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> From 'Pauses for Advent' by Trevor Hudson, p35-36

So, he forgives Mary, his love for her allows this, his compassion and understanding for others comes to the fore. He doesn't say anything, but his actions speak for themselves. Despite the trouble, he finds the deep peace of the Prince of Peace.<sup>2</sup>

Our world continues to wait for peace. We need peace now as much as we ever had. Peace within ourselves, in our homes, in our communities, in our world.

In 2020 we have seen political unrest across the globe – Hong Kong, the middle East and in recent months Ethiopia and Thailand. We have watched the Black Lives Matter movement grow in response to violent confrontations across the world. We have watched from afar the USA election where it seems the current President shapes up for a fight each week rather than accepting reality and going peacefully. In recent days we have heard of terrible atrocities done by a few in our name in Afghanistan – a long war with more tragedy than we ever thought. Ironically in Bethlehem, the birth place of the Prince of Peace has been closed this year to pilgrims as it is not safe.

How we need peace.

How might we get that peace? Joseph might just have the answer for us.

If we put others before ourselves.

If we learn to forgive others.

If we begin to see things from the perspectives of others.

If we look to God's word and wise counsel for advice.

If we choose compassion rather than self-righteousness.

If instead of knee jerk reactions we take our time and weigh up our options.

If we are not beholden to fear

Then we will know peace, that deep peace that surpasses all understanding. That deep peace that Isaiah envisions and Joseph lives. Maybe we might find Gandhi's prayer instructive:

I offer you peace

I offer you love

I offer you friendship

I see your beauty

I hear your need

I feel your feelings

My wisdom flows from the highest source

I salute that source in you

Let us work together

For unity and peace.

As we move closer to Christmas, let us continue to hope for and pray for peace. Let us prepare our hearts for the Prince of Peace to enter our hearts again. Let us prepare our community to discover the Prince of Peace on whom our faith centres. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> From 'Christmas by Candlelight' by David Thomson