

Righteousness and Peace Shall Kiss

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Dec 10th, 2023 - (Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13)

Bethlehem is closed for Christmas, closed because right now it is surrounded by war. No peace where the Prince of Peace was born. A far cry from that first Christmas, where the hills were peaceful, shepherds sleeping until they were awoken by the songs of angels.

Today is our second Sunday in Advent, the week we celebrate Peace. It is also Human Rights Sunday.

Peace can be so elusive, and something we have known especially in the last few years. In the last few years, we have seen continuing trouble in Myanmar, Iran and Ukraine. Of course, in the last couple of months we have witnessed horrific sights in the 'Holy Land'. We know just how precious peace is.

The psalmist tells us God has and will speak peace to his people and we know he has done that especially in the person, works and life of Jesus, the one we know as the 'Prince of Peace'.

So, what is peace? Is it just quietness and calmness? Is it being untroubled and the absence of violence, conflict and war? Is it tranquillity and stillness.

In our reading today, the Psalmist reminds us of the past – that God has indeed looked after the people. He then goes on to paint a picture of what the future might look like – God will speak peace to his people, those who hold him in their hearts. Love and faithfulness will meet and righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

It seems to me that if love, faithfulness and righteousness are practiced, that indeed the result will be peace.

Just a word about the Hebrew used here. The word 'righteousness' to us means being upright, proper. However, the Hebrew conveys a much broader understanding. It means justice, rightness, it has a legal sense – impartiality, fairness and means being ethically right. It is about right standing and right behaviour.

Now that begins to make sense to me. If we would pursue peace we need to be acting ethically, practicing fairness and impartiality, behaving properly. Indeed, living as Jesus did and perhaps reclaiming life as God originally intended, peaceful and whole.

As I look around the world today, I truly believe that peace might be possible if we made sure everyone had enough to eat, had shelter, did not have other people occupying their land, if people could forgive each other and say sorry then we might just be able to glimpse the peace that Jesus promised through the gift of the Spirit. Then as the psalmist says righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Today is Human Rights Sunday and we have looked at the work an NGO close to us, Baptist World Aid. It is organisations like this that work to bring about peace. Since 1959 Baptist World Aid has worked in more than 24 countries throughout Africa, the sub-continent, Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific. Through their programs they provide relief in times of disaster, through their children's programs they educate about nutrition, hygiene and children's rights. They help fund income making schemes like gardening, sewing and so on. Through their ethical fashion program they investigate our clothing companies and see if they are protecting their workers and environment in the supply chain. They check if people are being paid a fair wage and if the materials used are sustainable. Once a year they prepare a report to show us how these companies are doing. At Christmas you can buy their gift cards as Christmas gifts to support income generating schemes (trees, sewing machines, chickens), or support their hygiene and clean water programs or help buy education supplies for children so they can go to school. This is practicing 'righteousness' so that peace might reign.

The world waits for peace. We yearn for peace in our lives, in our homes, in our politics and in our communities. How might we rediscover peace? Perhaps in the first instance we should look to Jesus – the one known as the Prince of Peace. The one who always offered those he encountered a word of peace – peace be with you he says so many times. The one who broke down barriers that caused division. Finally, he offers the gift of the Holy Spirit which brings peace. Yes, he is indeed the Prince of Peace.

Maybe we need to make the attributes of God and Jesus manifest in our lives. Loving our neighbours, breaking down barriers that exclude, sharing our food, our homes, our land to those who are hungry, needing shelter, forgiving one another, acting fairly and justly will bring about peace.

Desiring peace does not make us foolish or simply unrealistic dreamers, it makes us people who want what God wants and believes it is possible if we but play our part. Our peace strategy will involve listening to another, listening to their pain and struggles, opening our hearts to others and practicing forgiveness. Forgiveness and the practice of love is the foundation to peace.

Creating peace is a choice. As we sing our Christmas carols proclaiming peace, let us think about our role in helping bring it about. This advent, pray for peace, cultivate and practice peace in your lives. God has promised peace to his people and maybe one day soon Bethlehem and its surrounds will know peace once more. Amen.