

'Peace on earth'. Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 20 December 2009

Jesus, you may remember, tells you that if you arrive with a gift at God's altar and realize that your brother or sister has something against you must leave your gift behind and first go and make peace with your brother or sister. But, you may say: we must be realistic. Jesus obviously did not have my brother, who is just so impossible. Jesus obviously did not know my sister, who is so difficult. But wasn't Jesus talking about anyone with whom we are at odds. Do I really think Jesus would change his teaching if he knew my brother? But what if they won't be reconciled, we may ask. Sometimes, of course, this is the case. There may be nothing further we can do with someone who is literally a brother/sister/father/mother/son/daughter or with someone who is in a more general sense a brother/sister or father/mother or son/daughter where a relationship is damaged. There will be people present this morning who can immediately think of such a painful situation. I believe that Jesus knows only too well that such situations arise. After all, his earthly life ended strung up on a cross by people who simply would not be reconciled.

In the light of this, what are we to make of the message of the angels telling us of the arrival, with a babe in Bethlehem, of peace on earth? And what are we to make of the Old Testament passage we've just heard, where humankind is promised a ruler who will not only bring peace but who is altogether 'one of peace'. As one translation puts it: 'He will be their peace'(NIV). The greatness of this promised ruler lies in his bringing peace, but peace to whom. As in the lessons from Isaiah 9 and 11 that we heard last Sunday morning, peace to the entire world. We will all have different views on the efficacy of war to promote peace and justice. Tomorrow, the daughter of a friend of mine begins her military service in the Israeli Defence Force. I have always been struck by the gentleness of this girl's name, Tal. 'Tal' is the Hebrew for 'morning dew'. From tomorrow onwards, Tal will need to be anything but gentle, just as her mother, my friend of many years, was required to be when she served in the Israeli Defence Force. I have some difficulty with their position, but I am obliged to respect it. If I do not, if I insist that my view of the situation is the right one, then I am, in fact, destined to be not a peace-maker but a war-monger. Isn't this what Jesus was indicating in the Sermon on the Mount when urged us first to make peace with our brother or sister?

According to Micah, this ruler will bring peace not with a sword but with strength of a different kind. It is a strength that corresponds to that of Jesus. I wonder: would Jesus have any followers today if he had travelled the road that Judas Iscariot seems to have wanted him to follow? Some people think that Judas wanted to force Jesus' hand and be a zealot, leading an army against the Romans. What if? What if Jesus had said: 'Yes, this idea of non-violence in the face of violence is ludicrous. Let me not take up a cross but a sword!?' What would your view be of Jesus if the gospels had recorded him as saying on the cross not: 'Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing' but 'You've got me now, but just wait, God will pay you back for this'?

They were hard times for Micah and his fellow-Israelites. And North Americans have this in common with them: a sense of insecurity pervades our lives; we typically look

toward perceived seats of power for rescue or to established professionals (doctors, lawyers, bankers, public engineers, even clergy) to protect us from what threatens and makes us feel vulnerable. (This weekend's summit on climate change)

'Yet, while we are looking toward prime ministers and presidents, satraps and senators, Micah is jumping up and down, waving his arms, desperately trying to point us in an entirely different direction. He is pointing to a small, out-of-the-way place: a town called Bethlehem. He is pointing to a leader who stands "in the strength of the LORD" (v. 4), rather than in the strength of weapons or power or wealth or territory. Here is a difference that makes a difference.'¹

The presence of God is not some pious hope. For those of us about to celebrate the incarnation, the presence of God is about as down-to-earth as possible. But we have to be prepared to find God's activity in people and places that are off the map, in the Bethlehems and the stables of our world and lives. Advent's call then is a call to eyes, ears, and hearts that are trained to expect the unexpected and to listen for the least likely voices. Where else are we to find peace if not on earth?

I'm told that when I was a little girl, I had quite a vivid imagination about what happens after death. I don't actually remember thinking like this, but my mother used to enjoy telling people about my interesting understanding (or rather misunderstanding) of two terms I knew were to do with death. One was the word 'obituary'. I thought the word was 'orbituary' and heaven, to which I'd gathered people went after death, was somewhere in orbit. (Perhaps I knew that one day I would live near Cape Canaveral!).

Connected with this thought of the deceased rocketing into orbit, I had rather a strange understanding of the abbreviation R.I.P. Now you all know that RIP stands for 'Rest in peace', yes? Imagine my mother's amusement when she discovered that I thought RIP stood for 'Return if possible'! I suppose that went with my childhood concept of the deceased going into orbit. It's quite logical when you think about it. 'What goes up must come down' or perhaps might do given the right conditions.

Well, this was clearly wishful-thinking, based on my knowledge that those left behind after someone's death were sad. I wanted the person to return if possible. In some ways, however, I think I had the right idea. I was concentrating not on the after-life, about which I obviously wasn't too clear about, but on the present-life, life on earth. I was keen that whoever had died might return to life on earth, rather than staying in heavenly orbit.

Misguided though I was, I think I had the right idea about Christianity. This religion does not spend much time speculating about the afterlife. It is certain that there is one, based on God's unflinching love for each individual; but in terms of how we live now, Christianity encourages to concentrate on life here and now. Isn't this what the angels say to the shepherds: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace ...'? These shepherds, after all, had a very earthy job. If you go to the Holy Land, you can still visit

¹ Nancy S Taylor (2009) in *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 1 p 76

the Shepherds' Fields, on the edge of the little town of Bethlehem. Who knows whether these were *the* fields? But I don't need to know the precise spot on which they were watching their flocks to get the sense of the down-to-earthness of their experience. The shepherds needed peace on earth. We need peace on earth. On earth is where we live our lives, where God can bring us peace in the here and now and where God's son blessed those who are peacemakers.

Stephen and I chose four different Christmas cards to send to friends and family this year. For one reason or another, we've been a bit behind getting them all out this year, but I think we're about there – with all of four mail-delivery days to go! But I've kept back one card in order to refer to it in this morning's sermon on peace. You can't see it from where you are, but the picture on the front is of modern-looking shepherds of different ages and backgrounds, some with lambs in their arms. In the sky are three modern-looking angels, one playing an accordion, one a trumpet, and one a saxophone. I'd like to read you what it says on the back of the card. Under the heading 'Annunciation to the Shepherds' it reads: "‘And on earth peace,’ the angels sang to the shepherds. *Peace* they sang to those on the edge of town, the edge of the community; *peace* they sang to those who lived outside the circles of power; *peace* they sang at the borders of Bethlehem, the city that still bleeds.’

So our reading from Micah this morning speaks of the hoped-for ruler feeding his flock. Some think that Micah cannot possibly have given such a hopeful message, given the unsettled situation of his day. But surely it is in such unpeaceful times that a bringer of peace is needed. Bethlehem was not a peaceful place in Micah's time. It was part of a country dominated by the foreign power of Assyria. Assyria had already destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, where Micah lived, was coming under threat. Bethlehem was not a peaceful place in Jesus' time. It was part of a country occupied by the Romans. Bethlehem is not a peaceful place in our time. It is part of a country where Palestinians and Jews are at odds with each other. Indeed, as a town on the West Bank of the Jordan River, Bethlehem is becoming increasingly depressed as the Middle East Conflict goes on and on. In my visits to the country, I have noticed the decline of Bethlehem and I was speaking to some one the other week who had just returned from Israel and was lamenting the poor state of Bethlehem.

These are the realities on earth and this is the hope of this season. Jesus comes to bring God's peace on earth. Those who live in the peace of God themselves are most likely to be able to help create peace where there is its opposite. And what is the opposite of peace? 'Peace is not the absence of conflict but the ability to cope with it.' The realities in our earthly lives are no more calm and bright than for the inhabitants of Bethlehem at many times in its history. Someone ironically observed a few weeks back that when President Obama received the Nobel Prize for Peace his speech included the word 'War' no fewer than 44 times. This really is not surprising as in the world today, there are about that number of major wars going on. There are scores of other conflicts but there at least 41 major wars currently.

The other day I looked up the origin of the phrase that Karen Mohl shared with me: 'Peace is not the absence of conflict but the ability to cope with it.' It has been used so frequently that it is hard to find its origin, but one famous occasion when it was used was by another recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, F W de Klerk. When he made his speech on being awarded the Peace Prize in 1993, this former president of South Africa said a whole variety of things about peace:

'The greatest peace ... is the peace which we derive from our faith in God Almighty; from certainty about our relationship with our Creator. Crises might beset us, battles might rage about us – but if we have faith and the certainty it brings, we will enjoy peace – the peace that surpasses all understanding.' De Clerk continued: 'Peace does not simply mean the absence of conflict. Throughout history, there has been an absence of conflict in many repressive societies. This lack of conflict does not have its roots in harmony, goodwill or the consent of the parties involved – but often in fear, ignorance and powerlessness. There can thus be no real peace without justice or consent. Neither does peace necessarily imply tranquillity. ... No relationship – between individuals or communities or political parties or countries – remains the same from one day to the next. New situations are forever arising and demand constant attention. Tensions build up and need to be defused. ... Peace, therefore is not an absence of conflict or a condition of stagnation. Peace is a frame of mind. It is a frame of mind in which countries, communities, parties and individuals seek to resolve their difference through agreements, through negotiation and compromise, instead of threats, compulsion and violence.'

When I was researching the circumstances of these words from F W de Klerk, I came across a fascinating article from *Time* magazine. It is based on an interview with F W de Klerk and the joint winner of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, Nelson Mandela. The interviewer writes: 'The mutual bitterness and resentments between De Klerk and Mandela are palpable. How could these two have agreed on anything – lunch, for instance, much less the remaking of a nation? In one sense, the answer is simple. Mandela and De Klerk perfectly meet the first precondition of peacemakers: they do not like each other very much. Harmony is only intermittently an issue between friends; the intractable messes of human coexistence are left for enemies to hammer out.'

Isn't this true for each of us? We might think that when we are entirely comfortable with someone then we have peace, when there is no one and nothing to upset us then we have peace, when everyone else agrees and co-operates with us, then we have peace. 'Just give me a bit of peace', we may cry out when we want other people to go away and leave us alone. But the message of the angels was not to one person enjoying restful tranquillity. It was to a group of hard-working shepherds trying to eke out a living in an occupied county. They had to find peace with each other with all the faults and foibles that human beings have. God's glory was to be found in heaven but God's peace was to be found on earth. God's action always needs a specific place and specific people. So this specific Bethlehem in Ephrathah was the place where the international shepherd-ruler would rise.

We are approaching the time when we celebrate God's coming to share in every way in our earthly life. As someone put it: 'Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of God.'

'Peace is the pervasive sense of contentment that comes from being rooted in God while being fully aware of one's own nothingness. It is a state that endures beyond the ups and downs of life, beyond the emotions of joy and sorrow. At the deepest level one knows that all is well, that everything is just right despite all appearance to the contrary. At all times one can pray with Jesus, "Father, into your hand I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46.)²

May we in this season experience God's presence, whatever our circumstances. We may have to accept that we have done all we can, at present, to resolve a personal conflict. We may just have to believe that all is well, all is just right despite all appearance to the contrary. We may just have to rest in peace, not in some heavenly stratosphere but in the conflicts of here and now. Let us then heed the words of Micah speaking a hopeful message in tough times. Let us listen to the message of the angels announcing peace to the humble, weak, and fearful in Bethlehem. Then in our humility, our weakness, and our fear we shall find peace: peace with God, people with each other, and peace with ourselves. We shall then have peace on earth.

² Thomas Keating (2000) *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit* p 19