

Isaiah 11:1-10

THE SHOOT OF PEACE

‘Like a branch that sprouts from a stump,...’ (1a) Think about those words. What images, memories, or thoughts do they bring up for you? Are they words which perhaps speak to you about life and restoration, coming out of death and desolation? What do they make you think of? One image which often comes up for us is that of new shoots bringing signs of life to bush or forest which has been cleared by fire, when what had looked black and lifeless can quickly show signs of life and regrowth. It’s a cycle of destruction followed by new life we see every year in Australia, and sadly it’s happening already again this summer. We’ve all probably seen it, we’ve all most likely driven and or walked through it; land which seems to be black and dead just weeks later shows signs of life, until soon there is little sign left of the destruction which was there. A little while ago I saw a documentary about the cities which had to be abandoned after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. These towns had to be cleared of people after that event, and still today 40 years on the radiation levels there are so high that people can only be there for a short amount of time. And yet, buildings and streets which had appeared desolate have now been reclaimed by nature, with vegetation growing in and around the buildings and life in forms both large and small making homes there (although some, sadly, do show the signs of damage from the radiation). In both the burnt out landscape and the abandoned cities, what had appeared to be wiped out beyond saving is able to be given new life and restoration.

And with that new life and restoration comes peace. How do we often define ‘peace’? It’s one of those words we can explain by what it is not; peace is the absence of noise, the lack of worry, the end of conflict. But in the words used for ‘peace’ in the Bible it is about completeness, restoration, and that all is well. Think about that in relation to both the bush and forests wiped out by fire, and the cities which have been abandoned. In the beginning these places seem to be completely dead, and you could walk through them thinking they will never be alive again. But over time, as life does return, to walk through them means

to see the animals and the new growth, to hear the birds and the insects, and to find comfort that even after great desolation life still finds a way to restore itself and go on. As these places are restored, with life coming from the roots through the stump which seemed to be dead, they bring peace.

‘Like a branch that sprouts from a stump,...’ (1a) While this reading uses imagery of barren land being restored, and the hunter and the hunted animals now living peacefully with one another, at its heart it is about the restoration of relationships, and the peace which will exist between people. Isaiah uses the images we have here to tell people that when the promised King comes, the one who will come from the family of King David himself, that He will restore the relationships of all His people, because He is a King who will rule with love, honesty, justice and compassion, and will give His people hope and peace. With what they were experiencing at the time from their rulers, those people would have been as sceptical about this as we could perhaps be if we’re told a burnt-out land could soon be green and alive again. If we can’t see the green shoots which are the signs of life, it’s hard to believe that life can still come from the roots.

Advent is a time of peace. That is sometimes said, and often laughed at. The lead up to Christmas, when we get ready to celebrate that Jesus came to bring ‘peace on earth’, can feel like the least peaceful time of the year. It’s a time when going to the shops can be a whole lot busier than it normally is, when the calendars of ourselves and our family are over filled with parties, farewells, windups and other events. It’s also a time when we can over worry and over stress ourselves on things like what to get for Christmas presents, how to make our holiday plans all fit in, where and with whom to spend the Christmas celebrations, what to eat. The pressure we might put on ourselves about these things, pressures which advertising seems more than happy to make even greater, threatens any feelings of ‘peace’ we might have at this time.

But that’s in a way surface stuff which is with us for a while but then passes on. This time of the year also can take away our peace for many other, much longer lasting, reasons. As we buy the presents and plan the food, it’s a time of sadness for those who can’t afford to give their families the kind of Christmas they wish to. As we decide who we are going to spend our celebrations with this year, it’s a time for some of being reminded of those no longer with us in this life to share our celebrations. In that it’s also

a time when tensions in families come to the fore, the effect of relationship break ups come into play, as juggling and adjusting to changing relationship and family dynamics means that at this time we'll be reminded of where things are actually at between us and others. Advent is a time of peace, Christmas is a time of joy and celebration. True. But they are also times when we have the strongest reminders of where these things don't exist in our lives.

And yet, the shoot which Isaiah talks about in this reading, Jesus, came to bring peace. And as I said earlier, in this sense 'peace' is about much more than quietness, no worries, or the end of conflict. The peace God planned to bring into the world through Jesus is about the restoration of relationships; regrowth and new life where there only seemed to be death and desolation. We can find that hard to believe, but we need to remember that the life is in the roots, and the roots are God's love for us. From this comes the stump which is Jesus and the peace in our lives grows from there. The only way we can know the peace God offers to all people, the peace of having lives which are grounded in the hope only He can give us, is to know His love for us in Jesus. Through Jesus' death and resurrection we know our relationship with God is restored. Through Jesus paying the price for our sin we know that everything which had separated us from God has been removed. Through the grace of God coming into our world in Jesus we know can live in His peace (something we can remind ourselves about each day through our prayer cards and grace dots). Jesus Himself shows us that what had seemed dead can have full life again, and that's a promise we live in and with each day also.

What had seemed dead can have new life from the roots. Some of you know that we have a new puppy at our house now. She's a lovely dog, but she's a puppy doing the stuff that puppies do. She's the third cattle dog pup we've had, so we know what to expect, but I was still disappointed to go outside one day and see the black elephant ear plant I had in a pot just totally cut off at the bottom. It had no sign of life, so I was going to throw it out, but my wife said, 'if the roots are still there, put soil back around it, keep watering it and see what happens'. Sure enough, now we again have a beautiful plant, growing as good as ever, especially because I've now put it up higher where she can't get to it. I had thought it was dead and gone, but new life came from the roots.

Do we ever write off relationships, or situations, or maybe even our relationship with God, because we think there is no life or hope left there? Do we only see the destruction caused by our human efforts, rather than the new life which can come through the shoot of peace God has sent to us? Do we sometimes need to go back to the roots of His love for us, the peace He offers us, the hope He invites us to live in, so we can again both live in and share what this restoration and new life can mean for everyone? This time of Advent, the lead up to Christmas, is a good time to do that, as we go through all the things we talked about earlier which can easily bring us down, shatter our peace, damage or destroy our relationships, even take us away from God. In the middle of everything which is going on, take the time, make the time, to stop, remember, reflect, on what it means for you and everyone around you that Jesus came to help all people to know the fulness of life which can only come through God.

‘Like a branch that sprouts from a stump, someone from David's family will someday be king.’ (1) Still in our world today we can struggle to always experience the peace of a full and complete life lived in God’s love for us. But, through Jesus, it is always there. Advent is a time of peace, Jesus came to bring peace for all people, even though there will be times when we struggle to really feel that. Thank God though, that this doesn’t rely on us in any way; it’s there for all people to experience through His making this prophecy come true in Jesus. Know God’s peace. Live in God’s peace. Share God’s peace. Amen.

For Further Discussion/Reflection

- Can you think of something you have witnessed where new life came out of what had seemed to be dead? Did this surprise you?
- How do you feel at this time of the year? Excited? Hopeful? Knowing God’s peace? Or do you feel sad? Overwhelmed? Worried about what might or might not happen? As you lead up to Christmas do you experience a mixture of these kinds of feelings and more?
- Do you always feel the peace of God in your life, of knowing and living in His love? If not, what takes this peace away from you?
- At what can be a busy, and stressful, time of the year, what can you do to take time and make time to remember God’s love for you and reconnect with the peace He offers to us all?
- Jesus came to be the shoot of peace for all people. This Advent and Christmas season how can you share this with others?

Pray: thank God for His unending love for each one of us, and that in Jesus His peace and grace have come into our world and our lives. Pray that we both know His peace and share it with others.

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