

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera QLD

8th December 2024 – Second Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:1-6

PEACE IN OUR WORLD

On Christmas Eve of 1914, on the battlefields of France we commonly call the Western Front, a strange thing happened. As British and French soldiers on one side, and German on the other, were sheltering in trenches with the barb wire and crater filled expanse of no-man's-land between them, over the sound of gun and artillery fire another sound was heard. As the shooting stopped, the sound turned out to be soldiers singing Christmas carols. These carols were being sung in different languages, but gradually the songs came together as those who not long before had been trying to kill one another sang together of God's love for the world. As the spirit of togetherness grew, some soldiers ventured out of their trenches under flags of truce and bravely walked into that normally deadly area of no-man's-land. Finally in these areas the trenches on both sides were emptied, as all the soldiers gathered together to exchange gifts of cigarettes and chocolates, and by the light of Christmas Day they were showing each other photos of their families, and games of soccer had begun; this apparently happened in some areas of the Western Front, but in others the fighting continued. Sadly, this impromptu truce didn't last, and when Christmas was over they went back to war again. In his moving song, *Christmas in the Trenches*, John McCutcheon tells the story of this event from the viewpoint of a soldier there, and at the end he writes that when they went back to their trenches and took up their rifles against each other again; "the question haunted every man who lived that wondrous night; 'whose family have I fixed within my sight?'" Not surprisingly, the commanders of each army weren't impressed with this impulsive Christmas truce, you can't allow soldiers to see those they are supposed to be killing as being as human as you, and so strict orders were given in each following year to prevent it from happening again. But in that instance, at least in some places, the peace of Christmas had come into a place of conflict and suffering.

Christmas is a time of peace. When the angels brought the news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, a part of their message was, "Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God." (*Luke 2:14 CEV*) When the baby Jesus was brought to the Temple and seen by Simeon, Simeon said those well known words, 'Lord now let your servant depart in peace' (*Luke 2:29*). Christmas is a time of peace. Peace in our

world. Is that what we always feel and experience, though? For us, Christmas can be one of the busiest times of the year, can't it, as we run around buying presents, organising meals and buying food, preparing for and setting off on holidays, or perhaps getting ready for visitors to come to us. Peace?! As much as we might enjoy this time of the year, we may feel that the peace part comes when it's all over and life gets back to normal again.

And how about on other levels, emotionally, socially, is Christmas always a time of peace? It's a time of year when many feel at their loneliest as they remember those with whom they used to celebrate Christmas but who have now died, or it's a reminder of relationships which have been broken so that this time can no longer be spent together. It's a time when, not in a bad way, we really notice if some of our family now live away, or they are spending this time with other families. For some, Christmas highlights the gifts, the food, the celebration, which they are unable to provide for their own family or themselves. Christmas is a time of peace, peace in our world, that's what the Bible says it's all about, but sometimes we can struggle to find that. What does it actually look like?

When we look at how the Bible talks about and teaches this concept of 'peace', it's about a lot more than either the lack of fighting, or even peace and quiet, that we often think of. The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament is 'shalom', and it has the meaning of wholeness, completeness. It was a common greeting to greet someone with the word, 'Shalom', wishing them the completeness and fullness in their life God intends for them. The word can also be used to describe a perfect stone, or a complete wall. When it's used in relationship to fighting, it's interesting that it's not just about fighting ending, but it being replaced by something better; people working together. When I was at Yirara College in Alice Springs, a boarding school for indigenous teenagers from remote communities, the gentleman who was in charge of our male students whenever there would be a fight between two of them, not only would he get them to sit down together, say sorry, and shake hands, but he would also then get them to do some kind of a job together, something all the others could see them doing, so that everyone could see their fight was now over and they were now working together. Restoration of a relationship; peace.

And in the New Testament the Greek word used for peace is 'Eirene'. This word is very much about the peace which comes to us in a restored relationship. This is the word the angels use when they sing of 'peace on earth', and Simeon when he says, 'let your servant depart in peace'. It's about our relationship with God being restored, the relationship which was broken by our sin, and can only be healed by the perfect sacrifice of His Son, who comes into the world to die and pay the price which should be ours. If you've had a close relationship which was broken, and then restored, you have an idea of what that peace is, how it feels. Doing that in our relationship with God is what the peace of Christmas is all about. It's great that there have been Christmas truces in wars, it's great whenever families can put aside their differences to gather together for Christmas, and this is certainly a time of year when we all look for some peace and quiet in the midst of all the hustle and bustle. Most people would probably say that Christmas is a time of peace.

But true peace, the peace the message of the Bible brings us even in relation to Christmas, this peace requires taking what is broken and restoring it to wholeness.

And that's what God does in sending this baby into the world, to grow up and die on the cross. That's the peace of Christmas. God brings this peace into the world, the restoration of this relationship with Him that the world needs so badly, by doing what He had been promising to do for thousands of years; sending His Son to be our Saviour. At the end of our Bible reading here we hear the words of Isaiah the prophet talking about Jesus and saying, 'Then everyone will see the saving power of God.' (3:6 CEV) The saving power of God. That tiny, helpless, baby lying in an animal feeding trough. Certainly not what is expected, but then God has a long history of doing things very successfully in unexpected ways. It's interesting that this reading starts with referring to the Roman Emperor, the local kings, and the chief priests. But these, like all human rulers, can't bring about true and lasting peace. For that, we are pointed to the One who is coming in God's name, not to conquer, but to give up His life. Not to rule, but to serve. Not to conquer and divide, but to bring peace; peace with God, peace among all God's people.

For us, a big way we come to know this peace is in the forgiveness we have from God through Jesus. Removing our guilt, our worries; knowing that there is now nothing that can separate us from God, but that we can always turn to and rely on Him. Isaiah is also quoted in our reading as saying, 'Fill up every valley

and level every mountain and hill. Straighten the crooked paths and smooth out the rough roads.’ (3:5 CEV)

That’s what the people were called to do to get the path ready for the coming of the King, and it’s now what Jesus does for us. Think about the valleys in your life; your guilts, your hurts, your disappointments, all the things which drag you down. Jesus in His love and forgiveness comes to fill those valleys so that in and through Him your path can be smoother. Think about the mountains in your life, those things you find it hard perhaps to either get over or go around; your anger, resentment, jealousy or greed, all those things which prevent you from experiencing the peace God wants to give you. Jesus in His power and grace comes to help you knock down and remove these so that you can more easily live your life in Him, walking His way of peace within yourself and with others.

This is the path of peace we can come to know in having this relationship with God which leads to peace. The relationship of repenting; saying ‘sorry’, receiving His forgiveness, now trying to walk on His path in our lives. The relationship of staying close to God by remembering His promises to us in our Baptism, hearing these promises again and again in His Word, and touching and tasting God’s love when we come to receive Holy Communion. The peace of Christmas is about God fixing what was broken, His relationship with His people, and us now walking in and sharing this peace each day.

Christmas is a time of peace. Not just a truce in fighting, or peace of mind. As good as those things are it’s about the peace we can only know in having a fully restored relationship with God, something which can only happen in having Jesus as our Saviour. Our world needs peace. We each need peace. In so many different ways. But the peace which is above all of them, and ultimately leads to them all, is the peace of a loving relationship with God; broken by us, restored by Jesus. May you know God’s peace in your life, at Christmas, and every day. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Do you feel and experience God’s peace each Christmas? If so, what does it feel like? If not, what is preventing you from having peace at this time?
- God’s peace means the full completeness of a life lived in His love and forgiveness. When do you experience this? Are there times or situations when it feels a long way away from you?
- Think about or discuss how as we know the peace of a full relationship with God we can now share this peace with others.

Pray: thank God for the peace we can only find in Him. Ask Him to turn to Him so we can both know this peace ourselves and share it with others each day.

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