

Sermon Christmas Day 2022

The angels came to the shepherds praising God, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favours.' The word I want to focus on is *peace*. It is a word that crops up frequently in association with Jesus. In Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah, as we heard in our reading, he includes 'Prince of Peace' as one of the royal titles ascribed to the Messiah. Jesus himself references *peace* on several occasions. '*I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart.*' John 14:27. '*I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me.*' John 16:33. '*God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.*' Matthew 5:9.

The theme of peace comes up frequently throughout the New Testament. '*Do your part to live in peace with everyone.*' Romans 12:18. '*If you do this, you will experience God's peace.*' Philippians 4:7. One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit as given to us by Paul in Galatians 5:22 is *peace*. I could give you many more examples but I think you get the picture.

The more I think about it, the more I realise what a cherished and precious commodity peace is. It is a commodity I find myself praying for on the home front on occasions! Now this does raise an interesting point. Do I pray for a peaceful environment? Well, I could but we are entering the realm of miracles here, so to discover peace I have to find it within myself. That is the secret to peace.

There is the story of a king who announced that he would give a prize to the artist who could paint the best picture depicting peace. Many great painters sent the king their best efforts. One of the pictures among the various master pieces was of a calm lake perfectly mirroring peacefully towering snow-capped mountains. There was a wonderful stillness about the painting. Most of the people who viewed the paintings thought it was the best among them all.

But when the king announced the winner, everyone was shocked. The picture which won the prize had a mountain too, but it was rugged and bare. The sky looked very angry, dark and stormy, and there was lightning. This did not look peaceful at all. Surely there must be a mistake in all of this. But if you looked closely at the painting, you could see a tiny bush growing in the cracks in the rock-face. In the bush a mother bird has built her nest. In the midst of the harsh surroundings and the impending storm, the bird sat on her nest in absolute peace.

Peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise or trouble. Peace means to be in the midst of the chaos and still be calm in heart. Real peace is the state of mind, not the state of surroundings.

So what has this got to do with Jesus? He promises us that he can provide us with that peace, that inner peace. However, it is not straightforward; we do need to have a significant degree of faith. It is really only with faith that we can put ourselves in his hands and then we will experience that peace. When the angels said, '*Peace on earth to all whom God favours,*' I don't think they really meant that God has favourites, just as parents we don't really have favourites, well, we're not meant to! (My favourite is whichever one happens to be behaving at that particular moment). It is more of a case of those who believe will experience that peace. It is not rocket science, if we don't believe, how on earth are we going to experience God's peace?

Christmas is a time for gifts. Let's not forget that we are celebrating a truly magnificent gift, God's gift to us in the form of Jesus Christ. All gifts come wrapped – this gift comes wrapped in the cloak of peace.

I would like to finish with a story about Christmas and peace. This is a true and quite well-known story, but it is a powerful and moving story. The story is related by a chap by the name of Jim Prince, who fought in the trenches in Belgium in the First World War.

In 1914 the war became bogged down in deadlock. The opposing sides, the British and the Germans, were hidden in cold, water-logged trenches. On the night of Christmas Eve, Jim Prince peered over the parapet towards the German lines. As he looked, he saw a light in the air above the German trenches, then he saw another, and then another. Soon, there were lights all along the enemy trenches. Then, from a German trench, not more than 50 metres away, a beautiful baritone chorus began singing, 'Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht' – *Silent Night, Holy Night*.

When the carol finished, the whole of Jim's regiment cheered and sang 'The First Noel.' For about an hour the opposing troops sang to each other. And then an amazing thing happened. A few of the Germans climbed out of their trench and began walking towards the British trenches. Then the British got out of their trenches and met them.

Soldiers met and shook hands. Peace was now sweeping through no-man's land. They laughed together and promised to continue the peace the next day. Christmas Day dawned cold and clear. No-man's land was soon filled with hundreds of soldiers from both sides, chatting and taking photos. Soccer matches were played. Mementos were swapped. Then soldiers from both armies dug graves side by side, and funeral services were held.

In some places the truce lasted until New Year's Eve. In Jim Prince's section, the fighting recommenced on December 29th. Jim died at the age of 85. He said that he could never hear 'Silent Night' without tears streaming down his cheeks.

Real peace is to be found within us. May we allow that peace that we celebrate this Christmas, and as promised by the angels, enter in and be born within us, so that we can draw upon that peace as we continue our journey as followers and disciples of Christ, as believers in the authenticity of the Christmas story.

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