

The Hope of Peace

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 3rd December 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (Advent Celebration Service)

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7 *The dawn of peace*
 Isaiah 11:1-9 *The Kingdom of peace*
 Luke 10:1-12 *Messengers of peace*
 Revelation 21:22-22:7 *The eternal city of peace*

Introduction: Shālôm

What do these words have in common?

- Wellbeing
- Welfare
- Prosperity
- Contentment
- Tranquility
- Security
- Peace

They are all possible translations of the Hebrew word Shālôm. In modern Hebrew it is also used as a greeting, perhaps in the longer phrase “Shālôm aleichem”, which is the equivalent of the Arabic “As-salamu alaikum”, “peace be with you.” And Christians use the phrase in whatever language they speak during church services, especially at the Eucharist.

Where there is no peace

I chose the four readings we have heard today because they are all about peace, something which we can easily lose as

we rush around getting ready for Christmas, stressed out with all the things we have to do – buying and preparing food or presents, decorating our home, preparing for guests to visit, running children around to parties, organising carol services etc! Christmas is sadly known as a time when relationships can become strained, expectations are not met, and what was supposed to be the highlight of the year becomes the very place where peace – Shālôm – is not.

In our world, we are so aware of the lack of peace in all its meanings. On the international scene, wars rage, civilians are killed, terrorized or bombed out of their homes, and hatred between communities flares. Lack of security is also felt by those affected by climate change as floods wash away crops and homes, or drought brings about hunger.

In our country, cash-strapped families struggle to give children a good Christmas – lacking the prosperity which is one meaning of Shālôm. Migrants who have just been awarded refugee status are evicted from their temporary accommodation and find themselves on the streets – no security there!

This is not how God intended the world to be!

The message of Isaiah

The two passages we heard from the book of the prophet Isaiah both come from the 8th Century BC, when the people of Israel in both the northern and the southern kingdoms were under threat from the mighty and ruthless Assyrian Empire. The prospect of war was always in the background. But within the nation there was corruption in high places,

oppression of the poor and weak by the rich and powerful, and a failure by the people of God to be faithful to him in their worship and daily lives. Destruction would come, first on the Northern Kingdom from the Assyrians, and then some time later on the Southern Kingdom of Judah from the Babylonians.

Many of Isaiah's prophecies are predictions of the troubles ahead and warnings to the people to turn back to God. But interspersed among these prophecies are visions of a better future, an age of prosperity, security, justice and harmony under a king who would rule with the wisdom of God and under the authority of the God who was the Eternal Father and Prince of Peace. This was a vision of Shālôm in all its fullness. Isaiah's visions were given to inspire the people to have faith and hope in God, and in his promise of a better future to which they could all aspire. They are words which should inspire us too as we pray and work for peace in our own day.

The message of Jesus

At the time of Jesus the Jews, suffering under the might of the Roman Empire, were hoping that God would bring in his Kingdom of peace and justice in their day under the promised king, the Messiah. And Jesus, like the prophets before him, called the people to turn back to God and believe the good news that the Kingdom of God was near.

Jesus knew, however, that the brokenness and alienation of the human race from each other and from God could only be healed through the sacrifice of his own life. On the Cross Jesus identified with the oppressed and broken, took the

punishment for the sins of the whole world and offered a model of self-giving love which is more powerful than selfishness, greed and hatred.

The hope of peace

In Advent, we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus into our world to be our Saviour. But we also look forward to the Kingdom of justice and peace one day becoming a reality, if not in the world as it is now, then in the world to come, when Christ returns as King and Judge.

This is the vision of John at the end of the Book of Revelation, which was our fourth reading today. In it, John sees the new heavenly Jerusalem, a place of light and peace, where all live in the presence of God the Father and his Son, the Lamb who was slain. It is a place where there is no more pain or suffering, where God wipes away every tear and where the river of the water of life nourishes the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Jesus promises, "See, I am coming soon!"

People of peace

So what does all this mean for us? Should we just keep our heads down, and do our best to ignore the devastation around us, while we patiently wait for heaven?

This was not what Jesus had in mind for his followers. In our third reading today, Jesus sent out his disciples to preach and heal in all the places which he himself was going to visit. Their message was the same as his: "the Kingdom of God is near". When they visited a house, their greeting was to be

“Peace to this house!” and if a person of peace was there, they would stay.

We too are called to help people prepare to receive Jesus. Whoever we are, and wherever we may live, work or play, we are to be the people who carry the peace of Christ with us. Some will receive it, others will not. We cannot control how others will respond to us, but we can make sure that we are people of peace ourselves.

So how do we do this? The place to start is with our relationship with God. The Christmas message is about God’s love for each one of us. We can grow in our appreciation of that love by spending time with God in special times of prayer and by keeping in touch with him during the day, as well as by joining others in worship.

And as we consciously bring God into every part of our lives and share them with him, we will be looking out for ways to share God’s peace and love with those we live and work with, and those we meet shopping, or in the doctor’s surgery or the gym. We may not be able to fix the problems of Ukraine or Gaza, but we can be instruments of God’s peace wherever we are.

After his death, Jesus came to his disciples who were frightened and confused and said “Peace be with you”.

Shālôm – peace, wellbeing, welfare, prosperity, contentment, tranquillity, security – this is the gift of Christ to us. Will we make it our gift to others this Advent, this Christmas, and every day?