

GOSPEL SEEDS JANUARY, 2007

Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation

THE GIFT OF A DISTINCTIVE BUT DISTURBING PEACE

All at once with the angel there was a great throng of the hosts of heaven, praising God with the words: "Glory to God in the highest Heaven, and on earth peace for those he favours." (Luke 2:13-14)

Christmas is a time of contradictions in all sorts of ways. It comforts, challenges and even confuses different people for different reasons. The angels' message of peace is one that is popular at Christmas and strikes an attractive note with many. But is it just groundless optimism or a pious platitude? 'What is peace and how can it be obtained?' is a question on the heart, mind and lips of us all often enough, but one that is very difficult to answer or implement. What do the angels and thus Scripture mean by peace?

Peace as well-being, the fruit of fellowship with God

Biblical peace, originally expressed in the Hebrew word 'Shalom', at root means well-being and indicates a certain completeness. It is the state of the man who lives in harmony with God, himself, other people and nature. Rich and multi-faceted, it is linked to and expressed concretely in other Biblical terms such as blessing, rest, glory, riches, salvation and life. Although holistic and embracing all of life, and thus material and social as well as personal, it is seen at its core as being spiritual. As such, God is at its centre; peace is a gift of God and flows from God. In fact, the term shalom is linked with the Hebrew for grace. Peace is the fruit of justice or right relations – between an individual and God and between persons. It needs to be built socially, and it requires us to steward the whole of creation and its resources justly too. In our fallen world, it also requires forgiveness, reconciliation, and deliverance from evil and oppression. The unity and deep loving fellowship of the Church is a powerful expression of peace, but this grace is to flow out into society and be applied to creation. It brings real happiness.

God, through the establishment of his kingdom will administer justice and bring peace. This was already the conviction of the Jewish people long before Jesus. The Jews, like all people, experienced the difficulties of establishing peace. They knew the limitations and evils of human rulers and the human heart. They thus looked to God to remedy the situation. Their prophets sharpened and focussed this view, with promises of a just ruler, a king who would shepherd the people and bring peace. 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; For a son has been born for us. A son has been given to us, and dominion has been laid on his shoulders. And this is the name he has been given: 'Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince of Peace'. He will extend his dominion in boundless peace, over the throne of David

and over his kingdom to make it secure and sustain it in fair judgement and integrity (Isaiah 9:1,5,6).” They identify such a ruler with God, even naming his as God. Equally he is seen not just as the bringer of peace, but peace himself (Micah 5:1-4).

The sign of a Child – peacefully asleep and nearly destroyed

All of this leads us to the nativity of Jesus. The angels announce the Good News of peace and salvation. God is with us. The sign is a child asleep in a manger. The newborn evokes a sense of wonder and reminds us of life being a gift. All this is a sign of peace, rest and tranquillity and even wonder. But is bringing peace and being peaceful really so easy? This child is born into poverty, homeless amidst an oppressed people. Whatever the tranquillity – often evoked by Christmas carols – it was rudely disturbed. The wonder of the shepherds and the worship of the wise men are followed immediately by the jealousy, insecurity and destruction of Herod. If this child is a real king, then his kingdom is threatened. The Infant Prince of Peace soon provokes violence that not just threatens him but affects many others as many children are slaughtered, many parents bereaved and some possibly killed defending their children, and many soldiers made into the perpetrators of heinous crimes.

Jesus is a somewhat paradoxical peace-bringer if he provokes such violent reactions. Jesus continued to be met with hostility, threats injustice and violence. Why – since we all want peace? Because the ‘world’ has forgotten that God is the giver of peace and must be placed at the centre. Indeed, it has not just forgotten this, but in our first ancestors it rejected God as the centre and has continuously tried to build its own security, prosperity and happiness without God. Not being God-centred it is man-centred and indeed, behind this, stirring things up, is Satan, prince of this world and also described as a murderer and destroyer, who seducing our first ancestors and thus having usurped much of man’s role to steward and rule the earth, exercises significant authority and power.

Thus Satan is behind the attack of Herod on the infant Jesus and he continues to oppose the work of Jesus, until he is finally overthrown. Now he fights against those who follow Jesus, those living in the peace of God and on the way of peace, witnessing to it and offering it, in its various facets, to the world. All of this is expressed in the rich, graphic but condensed language of Rev 12. The pregnant woman is identified with the Jewish race producing its Messiah and with the Church birthing people – born from above – into God’s family. The woman is both the Jews and the Church, both of whom are concretely represented by Mary, the woman who gave birth to Jesus. A red serpent, Satan, waits to consume the offspring of the woman in childbirth, but her son escapes. Certainly this refers to the opposition of Satan to Jesus and his followers throughout Jesus’ life and that of the church right down to our day. Does it not allude to the very brutal attempt to snuff out the life of Jesus at its very beginning, an attempt that led to his mother having to flee to Egypt, across a desert, for a period of a few years. This Christmas tale is used as a template, symbolically enriched, to indicate the dynamic by which peace comes but is resisted on its way to eventual triumph and that

Satan lies behind earthly tyrants like Herod and his dynasty. Thus from the beginning of Jesus' life, the pattern is established of a persecuted peace-bringer who disturbs the peace of this world in order to bring in lasting godly peace.

Which offer & gift of Peace do we want – at Christmas and always? And so to us! Will we accept the challenge as well as the comfort of Christmas? Do we want an easy peace, fruit of worldly power and prosperity or a peace the world cannot take away but will persecute? Will we live in his peace, witness to it in lives committed to justice, and invite others to come and know its source, the Prince of Peace?

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