

## SERMON ADVENT 2 PEACE

I'm not sure I know how to do this – to speak about peace. In all my years in ministry, I can't remember ever preaching specifically about peace. This year, rather than just paying passing attention to the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy and love, I decided to reflect on them, week by week, not least because I think we are all very aware of the great need for these things in the world. So I am not specifically following the lectionary, as you may have noticed. What do we mean by peace? Peace is linked to many different things: peace of mind, peace and quiet, peace-making, to name but three. Is peace something we imagine as a goal for all time, or is it focussed on the present? Is it part of the hope we were thinking about last week? Who are we thinking of when we speak of peace? Ourselves and our lives that are often distracted, bearing different kinds of stress? Is it peace for our world where we watch North Korea testing its nuclear weapons capability, where the Middle East is a hotbed of violent fractures and enmity between so many different groups? There is a great lack of peace in so many places. What does the idea of peace mean for the Rohingya, for refugees and asylum seekers, for those for whom poverty is a daily reality and for those for whom the struggle seems hopeless and only drugs or alcohol offer some relief, however fleeting and costly? How do we talk about peace today when it is so far off for so many?

Peace, when we think like this, seems a distant hope and not related to our everyday lives. But peace is not an abstract thing that we hope the world will attain sometime. For many people, peace is what they cry out for in the present. It could mean something as basic as an absence of violence. It could mean a place of security. It might mean having no

financial worries. Unlike hope which is more future focussed, peace is concerns the here and now. And while it may seem a most acute need for so many people, it is about everyone of us. It knits us all together because it is not something we can leave to other people, as we see when we are all called to be part of Act for Peace. Peace is about the very pathway we are on. As Richard Rohr says, "There is no path to peace, but peace itself is the path." He also says "we do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking." That needs a little thought. It implies, I think, that peace is not just about how we live; it is also linked to being aware that we have freedom to change.

Peace in our lives can mean many things and can be very close to people every day. Let's imagine an example which may seem far-fetched, but is reality for many people. Let's imagine a young woman, we'll call her Jacqui. Jacqui suffers from anxiety. She rarely feels at peace with herself or other people because the world appears to be a threatening place. Over the years, as she has tried to create a feeling of safety, she has developed routines for herself. When she gets up in the morning, she needs to do everything in the same order. She has to put her left sandal on before the right one. She always eats the same kind of toast for breakfast, spread with the same vegemite, and drinks her cup of tea from the same mug. Her day goes on like that. If we were to ask her what peace meant for her, she would struggle to answer. Let's imagine a bit more: one day she drops her mug and it shatters. She is distraught and can barely make herself get out to work. She manages, and, once at work, a colleague who senses her difficulties, asks her what has happened. Jacqui tells her about the disaster with the mug. This colleague listens to her and gently suggests it might help her to talk

to a professional about what has happened and about her anxieties. The upshot of this is that, after a considerable time, and helped by medication, Jacqui begins to get a different perspective on her anxieties and some seeds of peace begin to take root in her. Lack of peace can be very restricting in many ways.

There are countless stories about peace, taking many different forms. There are those people who take brave and non-violent stands against injustice. We might think of the civil rights movement, of the 1960s; the anti-nuclear movement, those who protest environmental destruction. There are, thank God, always people who are prepared to make difficult choices based on principles of justice and peace that they will not turn from, even in the face of abuse and opposition. Such things are happening all the time, all around us. Likewise, there have always been people who have known a call to contemplative life and who dedicate themselves to praying for the peace and well-being of the world. We need them. But for most of us, that is not the way. The lack of peace in the world, and the very noise and pace of life around us might make us want to retreat into a place where we can create a bit more peace around us, and we do all need times like that for our sanity. But we can't retreat, and Advent tells us that, because the message of the incarnation for which we are preparing ourselves is quite the opposite. What we are seeing again is how God chooses to become involved in all the mess of human life, in such an extraordinary way. It points us to the understanding of how much God longs for all people to live in peace with each other and with the very world we inhabit and how far God goes to help us do that.

This choice of God, this incarnation, is, after all, why we have Christmas to celebrate at all! We believe, as it says in John 3: 16 that “God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son”. In Colossians 1, we hear how Christ is the firstborn of all creation, before all things, and that “God was pleased to have all fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

The Bible tells us that God is about peace and has been from the beginning of time; peace and reconciliation with God, which has to mean with one another also. For that to become possible brings us to what, perhaps is the core challenge to our peace, something that we all face: to be able to accept ourselves, knowing the guilt and shame, the failure and obstinacy that seems sometimes to rule us, and to allow ourselves to dwell in the grace and forgiveness of God which are the only things that bring us peace. It is, I hope, part of the gift of being able to share in worship that includes the prayer for forgiveness and assurance of pardon. They are not just routine formulae but speak to the heart of how God makes it possible for life to be lived in hope, peace, joy and love. Without this, we have little hope of being able to live the peace we all long for. It has to start with us.

And how does God make this possible? The answer lies in the cradle and cross. There isn't much peace in the stories of Easter, though the first words the risen Christ speaks are to say “Peace be with you”. Nor is there peace in the stories of the first Christmas in Matthew and Luke. And for Mark the Jesus story starts with John the Baptist calling people to repentance. When we zoom in on the Christmas scene, we are brought to focus on the birth of a baby in extraordinary circumstances,

however we look at it. We are being invited in there, not just to look on from a distance, but to come close and ask if we are prepared, ourselves, to cradle this helpless gift of God and to and tend him. It is a costly gift and a costly tending, as Mary herself knew. But it is the way God imagined that would address the deep yearning in the hearts of people everywhere for peace. That yearning is not met by some vast promise of peace that could seem a mirage or an abstraction. The yearning is met by something undeniably human yet offered to us in the least threatening way possible, without power or privilege, a baby. As we imagine ourselves at that place, we can sense how our yearning is being met, and I think that is why the Christmas stories still capture the imagination of people who have no other faith journey than, perhaps, this one to Bethlehem.

But let us also recognise, as we contemplate how all the pain and problems of the world can fall away as our longing for peace finds its place, let us remember that this same longing draws us into the even greater yearning we believe lies at the heart of God. This why the gift, this part of God's own self, is given. In this child, the hearts of people and the heart of God are inseparably linked. And that is enough for us to believe in peace. This child, this peace, is not an abstraction. It is about us, right here and now, and how we carry this peace in our lives when we go out the door. As the words of the hymn we sang last Sunday say: "Put peace into each other's hands, and like treasure hold it; protect it like a candle flame with tenderness enfold it". And if, perchance, the flame should flicker and threaten to blow out, remember that God's grace and forgiveness never blow out, but wait for us to forgive ourselves and set off again in peace.