

The road to peace

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

The season of Advent in the Christian year is an abrupt disruption in our 'ordinary time'. It is not only a new season in the church year; it is an utterly new year, new time, new life. Everything begins again. We are challenged to think about God in the world, and when God is in the world, that means things are meant to be different. God purposes to offer new gifts to the world. Gifts the world has not always accepted. But gifts the world needs. God offers a vision of a healed alternative for the world. God offers peace.

God offers not only signposts pointing the way to peace, but roads along which we are called to travel, so that in the journeying, we observe, learn, change and peace becomes part of who we are, what we do, and how we shape our priorities. As many of us square our shoulders and take a deep breath before plunging in to one of the busiest times of the year, God calls to us to join with Him on the road to peace. Before the frenzy starts, God offers to us the gift of peace.

Peace.

Not just the absence of war, noise, stress, pain, fear, loneliness, hurt, despair. But peace. A gift that shines in the darkness. A hope that comforts. A reality that is active and not passive. Something to be worked for, and walked along.

The prophet Isaiah holds up a vision of what peace might look like. "He takes us to a mountain and shows us what our hearts are actually tuned for. First, he shows us that God's presence, by God's own initiative, will become more evident and compelling."ⁱ People from everywhere, from all over the world, from different backgrounds and cultures and races will be drawn to God. They will want to work together because they know they will need to work together. "Here is a revolutionary contrast to current complacency and cynicism."ⁱⁱ Here is a revolutionary contrast to the current brokenness of our warring world. I checked online a day or so ago to see how many conflicts were ongoing in our world. There are fifty-five. Afghanistan, Iraq, Boko Haram, Syria, Somalia, Darfur, Pakistan, Mexico, Yemen, South Sudan, Ukraine, Myanmar, Israel-Palestine,

Armenia, Bangladesh, Turkey. The longest ongoing conflict is the Kurdish separation from Iran which has been going on since 1946.

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One day we'll 'get' what it is that God is offering to the whole world, believing and non-believing; Christian, Jew, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist. That God is offering to God's children, all of them, to walk along the road to peace. Not build walls, not maintain barriers, not shut people out, not turn them away, not be blind to their needs, not be deaf to their pain, but to walk along the road to peace.

Disputes will be settled. Shelter will given. Hospitality will be extended. Welcome will be inclusive. Hurts will be healed.

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This walking along the road to peace with God will make a difference to the way in which the world will work. Inequities will be balanced; shackles will be loosed; wrongs will be set right. As we walk along the road to peace with God we will find that the weapons of war will need to be turned into instruments and tools that will till the land and feed the people. As we walk along the road to peace with God, if we dare to walk along the road to peace with God, we will find that nations will put their swords down, and will not train for war any more.

On Christmas Eve, 1914, for one night, the guns fell silent and a game of football was played between the two warring sides. In March 1974 Major Yoshimi Taniguchi flew out to Lubang Island in the Philippines to tell the last fighting Japanese soldier from World War Two, Hiroo Onoda, that the war was over and he could come home in peace.

Canon Mark Oakley, Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, was brought up by his grandparents. His grandfather had flown with the RAF in World War Two, and had been in the raid that had bombed Dresden. Mark was invited to preach in the reconstructed Frauenkirche in Dresden. On the way to the railway station after the service his taxi driver asked him why he was in the city. Mark plucked up the courage to say that he had always wanted to come, and being asked why

he said, "Because my grandfather was a navigator of a Lancaster bomber and I knew he flew here on 14 February 1945 as part of the bombing raid and he could never talk about it." The man was quiet and then said, "Ah, that was the night my mother was killed." He pulled over car over and turned the engine off. He then turned round to me, put out his arm towards me and said, 'And now we shake hands.'ⁱⁱⁱ

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"What we believe about God affects what we believe about ourselves."^{iv} God is a God of the journey. God is a God of the dynamic. God is a God of the road, and along that road God calls us to travel. At the beginning of Advent God is calling to travel with Him along the road to peace. That road to peace will have many landmarks along the way. There will be a landmark to unity – do we want to live in peace with each other and be together as a people, or are we intent of driving down divisions and building up walls? There will be a landmark to justice – do we want to live in a world that is fair and equitable, with equal opportunities for men and women, black and white and brown, rich and poor backgrounds, or will we continue to live in a world where the balance has gone and we are all out for ourselves and devil take the hindmost? There will be a landmark to inclusion – who will come to that table next Sunday and who will truly be welcome; who will walk in through the doors around this Church and Halls, and will they find a place where they can be at home and be accepted for who they are?

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Peace comes in many ways and into many places. At this time of year I sense a deep yearning for peace. Peace from trouble and unease in the home within the family. Peace from the sniping and bitching that goes on in the workplace. Peace from the conflict in politics in this country and across the world. I sense again a nostalgia for Christmases past and the idolisation of childhood wonder that represented our desire to believe again in things that seem impossible to us as adults – like peace on earth and goodwill to all.

God's peace does not come to paper over the cracks and divisions in fractured human relationships and in the broken places of our world. We have been disappointed so many times

and feel disillusioned. We see the lack of peace not only on the world stage but also in some of the most intimate relationships in our lives. When will God's promise of peace through Isaiah ever come? Can it ever come?

The prophet offers not only a vision of global and human transformation, but an invitation to walk towards that day. "Let us walk in the light of the Lord." There's a candle lit, defiant against despair, determined in the face of adversity. It lights the road to peace as we take one step at a time. We may feel cynical, we may feel hopeless, but God's outstretched hand reaches out to us now, as it always has done. In the blessing of a child, in the singing of a song, in the beauty of music, in the glory of a building, in the warmth of the person's heart sitting beside you, in the fact that here, today, we are together listening and wondering and questioning and hoping and walking on the road to peace.

"The future belongs to God, but the first step toward that future belongs to those who have glimpsed God's light and are willing to trust that enough light lies ahead."^v The road to peace lies ahead of us. Will you walk with God into the light?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Stacey Simpson Duke, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, p2

ⁱⁱ ibid p4

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Oakley, The Splash of Words, Believing in Poetry, p26

^{iv} Jonathan Sacks, Not in God's Name, p247

^v Duke, ibid, p6