

Peace and repentance

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Zeph 3:14-20; (Song of) Isaiah 12:2-6; Phil 4.4-7; Luke 3.7-18

You may have noticed over the past few weeks the gospel readings in this ‘Year C’ Advent season becoming increasingly austere. By today, John the Baptist is calling us vipers; questioning our motives in pursuing religion; warning us the axe is ready at the tree base, and that the one who is to follow him (i.e. Jesus) has a winnowing fork with which he will gather the wheat, and burn the chaff. So what do you think was the topic which Rob assigned me to talk about today? You guessed it — ‘peace’! Hmmm, thank you Rob.

Actually, I am grateful, because it’s forced to look more closely at these two themes of repentance and peace and how they relate. And it also had me wondering why it is that most of us associate Christmas with vague, sentimental and sometimes even cutesy peace symbols like doves and cribs and so on, rather than the idea that we should be amending and preparing ourselves. I’m particularly aware of this, because I had to sell Anglicare Christmas cards, and I don’t recall seeing too many winnowing forks in the artwork on them!

This, and real current events this week in our own community, like Peter Blaseotto’s death, and the strangely mixed circumstances surrounding the birth of Ruth and Leighton’s new baby Zara, should give us pause to think.

Why do we associate Advent with peace, and what do we really mean by this much used, but rather imprecise, word ‘peace’ anyhow? Today I am going to talk about four possible meanings. Partly because I hope this will give you some angles for your own Advent preparations and investigations. But also because I found that lining these meanings up pointed me to the idea that peace, like repentance, perhaps might best be seen as a process.

A good place to start is with the dictionary definition of ‘peace’. Webster’s defines it as “a cessation of, or freedom from, strife or warfare”. This idea of a conflict stopping is obviously an important and valid use of the word. We might call this first, ‘stage 1’ usage of the word a ceasefire peace. Ceasefires are important, partly because the parties stop hurting each other for a while. And sometimes even more because it gives some space to think a bit more clearly.

There is one key requirement: that the parties for some reason, maybe any reason, both decide and agree to stop what they are currently doing, even for a while. And to do that, there is usually a need for some kind of recognition that the current mode of behaviour is not helping them, or at least is not optimal.

Now, of course, not all conflicts are wars. We have all sorts of conflicts — in politics, at work, in our families, even in churches. And, perhaps most relevantly to each of us individually, within ourselves

Are you at peace? Really at peace? Despite surface appearances, my impression is that most people in our society are far from being truly at peace. There is often a lot of agitation. There are the kids to bring up, the mortgage to pay, and that boss at work so often seems to be the one from hell. Lots of people live in the past with memories or unresolved grief. Or in the future with ambitions, or plans, or anxiety about what might go wrong.

And many of us are fundamentally unsettled and restless. I know my mind sometimes reminds me of a stray dog, always rushing off to look at, or sniff, or grab the latest new sensation. Unsettled minds get easily bored; easily angry; easily caught up in desires; and

easily made anxious when they perceive (or even mis-perceive) any kind of threat. It's a kind of puppet-like state which gets more pronounced the more we just mindlessly do what our impulses tell us to, irrespective of the consequences.

Looked at in this way, John the Baptist's call is starting to sound like a kind of shock therapy for our own benefit. His truly is a voice in the wilderness of our modern world, the wilderness of a long dead culture. But his call remains relevant. The first step in the path towards inner peace is a ceasefire, even if it is to point out, rightly, that sustained puppet-dom leaves us at severe risk of turning into nothing but dead husks and dried out stalks. John is saying STOP, and take stock.

Now, getting the parties in a conflict to stop is generally just the beginning. As the Middle East demonstrates, the hard work is getting it to stick. To achieve a type 2 lasting peace the underlying causes and conditions need to change.

I don't intend to talk much about peacemaking in general today because it's far too big a topic in its own right. But, as any relationship counsellor will tell you, some of its key qualities are honesty, insight, persistence, a willingness to look at unpleasant truths and do unpleasant work. There is also a need to change attitudes, possibly make some sacrifices, and an ability to build trust and confidence, particularly when, as is so often the case, there is backsliding.

And again put this way there is, surely, another obvious parallel here with our own personal road of repentance. If we want inner peace, then we too need to discover and address and transform the underlying causes and conditions of our inner conflicts. And these things are subtle.

Change requires effort because it's up against years of conditioning, including lots of past indulgence of our impulses. We must be willing to open ourselves to scrutiny, and ruthlessly honest. We need new habits, including new habits of thinking. And to bear with a lot of internal resistance. After Jesus was baptised, the very next thing that happened to him was that he was immediately driven into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days. Which is what serious attempts at self amendment can feel like.

Now, some people may ask, "isn't this all a bit self-absorbed or even self-obsessed?" That is a risk to watch for. But John the Baptist's very first instructions to people who asked "what shall we do?", are instructive. He told them to do concrete things, in do-able blocks, in ways which also helped others. Tax collectors: only take what you are entitled to. Soldiers: stop extorting by threats. Not only would these concrete actions have helped the tax collectors and soldiers practically confront, and then amend, their own inner problem of greed it would also have increased peace in the world as they became less violent, and maybe even became credible role models. This is the way both peacemaking and repentance work. You change, and you affect the world around you in all sorts of direct and indirect ways. The greatest peacemaker of the modern era, Mahatma Gandhi put it perfectly when he famously said, "we must be the change we want to see."

Another, opposite, kind of objection is that "doesn't all this fault-finding self-negativity risk just creating another source of inner conflict, particularly for people with low self esteem?" Actually yes, this is actually a very real danger, particularly for those living in a culture like ours which is so good at feeding people's insecurity. But repentance done properly is actually a healthy and appropriate form of dispassionate love. The second great commandment is to love our neighbours as ourselves. Would you help a drowning person? If so, then we should take a real interest in who we really are, warts and all. Rather than being a dismal self-flogging exercise, true repentance actually enhances our underlying self-esteem as we start to discover how we work, and why. I wonder how those tax collectors and soldiers felt about

themselves once they had stopped being cads? Although they probably were not proud of their pasts, do you think they had more, or less, self-esteem for having stopped? There is a refreshing, immediate, wholesome sense of peace that simply comes from realising that we can, and have, taken the first real steps in leaving the land of slavery.

Now, as the process continues, peacemaking can take people into a whole new way of doing things. Stage 3 peace arises when a new and creative pattern forms in which the old causes of conflict are fundamentally reconfigured.

For example, after world war II Western Europe fundamentally realigned for a range of reasons. While the situation was complex, a key element in the shift was a change in the relationship between France and Germany which had been at war, and very nasty wars at that, 3 times in the previous 80 years. Though rather than punish Germany with more demands for reparations, Germany was helped to rebuild. For its part, Germany also went through a genuine, unprecedented and painful process of national remorse and soul searching during which the vast majority of German society became determined never to let the Nazi nightmare happen again.

And for France, it meant having to decide to work in partnership with an old and generally still disliked enemy despite very real and remembered immediate past wrongs. I am not suggesting that the decisions to do this were entirely altruistic. In fact, there was a lot of self interest and realpolitik because the allies were obviously worried about Russia, and wanted Germany as a buffer on their side. But to my mind, this makes the success of the process, which surely must have exceeded its architects' wildest dreams, even more interesting.

It's a good example of how 'practical forgiveness' can work. Not the sham kind of forgiveness where I say "I forgive you" but continue to nurse a resentment. But rather one where past hurts are very clearly recognised and accepted on both sides for what they truly were, but where decisions are also made to let them go and to start afresh, with a new pattern. It's like incorporating a deep grief, or having learned to let go of a crippling fear. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission process in South Africa is probably the most impressive recent public example of the power of this kind of liberating forgiveness and it too has contributed in no small way to a more creative and lasting peace in that country.

In our own journey towards inner peace it's almost inevitable that some pain will arise. While this can take several forms, a common one is contrition. Contrition is the point when it finally dawns on us just how puppet-like we have been, and when we finally comprehend the true extent of the consequences for ourselves and others of our behaviour. But the reward of that understanding can be release, freedom, and integration. As a new pattern forms then starts to flower out of that freedom a new kind of creativity can emerge. It then becomes reasonable to use another word that is often used with 'peace', and that is 'harmony'. While it doesn't mean an absence of problems, it's like a new and more complex and more beautiful sound has emerged from rearranging the old notes.

And this starts to sound like something else. It sounds like healing. True peace, like health in the body, is not just the absence of conflict or disease, it's a key condition for vitality, and growth. Jesus' coming promises us individually and collectively not only the cure of the disease that's killing us, but also a new state of health that we previously could not have imagined, and a life fully seen and lived. We do, though, have to decide we want to get better and be willing to undertake the treatment.

This stage 3 idea of peace is beautifully depicted in the traditional nativity scene, which is a kind of icon. It usually portrays a kind of circle including Joseph and Mary, some animals (usually cutely described as oxen lowing — I love that word 'lowing'!), wise men bringing

gifts, and shepherds who have come in from the hills after hearing a heavenly host of angels. At the centre of the circle is an innocent, yet already wise, baby who is the cause of these different groups all coming together, and the sole object of their attention.

This surely is a picture of us at the time when Christ is born within us. It's a perfectly formed scene of health and peace. Symbols of key parts of our soul called together, in a balanced circle to witness the arrival of the new, vulnerable, perfect, centre of our life. A life born in an obscure place in us because there was no room for him in our busy inn. It's a deeply relational picture, in which all the parts contribute to a greater harmonious whole.

And this picture also points towards a fourth usage of this word peace. A peace that is not of the world. We might call this transcendent peace. A critical, but often not immediately obvious, element of the nativity scene is a serene and pure point of light shining overhead : the same star that had already called the wise men to make their journey months before, even before this Christ was born, pointing them down a new and unknown path. A light which exists both above and within our mortal realm. A light which points to a peace that, as Paul described in today's letter to the Philippians, 'passes all understanding'. The peace which Jesus said was his special gift to his followers.

It's a peace of a different order, grounded in the infinite calm of the Father. It's the peace of a deep letting go, and this gives true freedom. Not the freedom of desire _ of getting what you want. It's the fresh, clear air of freedom from desire. And the freedom that comes from surrender. It is then, as Isaiah sings in today's reading, that we can start drawing deeply, and the profound joy, water from the very well of salvation, knowing we have finally come home. This is the kind of peace which Moses must have experienced as he finally looked on the Promised Land after wandering 40 long years in the wilderness. (And how many of us have wandered in that wilderness, or still are, or indeed are still in slavery in Egypt?)

Because this deeply centred peace surveys a new land in a different light, it understands everything, and so can endure everything: even betrayal, humiliation and death on a cross. It cannot become angry because its vast equanimity cannot be shaken. It can, in fact, do nothing else but be patient and kind. Indeed, this great silent shalom, at the end of the day, seems to become indistinguishable from the pure love, the caritas, that St Paul so eloquently described in 1 Corinthians 13.

The foundation on which this transcendent peace is built and maintained, though, is the continuous, life-long work of the previous 3 stages. The great race, the path of peace, and towards peace, is the path of repentance. It's a peace that is not at all sentimental, does involve choices, and is in fact likely to involve some hard work. But this is worth it. And we do get help along the way. As we nurture Christ's new life within us, He nurtures our peace. And as we finally surrender to Him, He is able to give us the Kingdom — the Kingdom He rules within us as our wonderful counsellor and true Prince of Peace. Behold the great tree grown from a mustard seed in which birds can now find shade from the beating sun! The Christmas, and indeed Christian, message is very deeply one of peace and peacemaking. And one that is as profound as our response chooses to make it.

Now, at the risk of un-peaceful thoughts arising within some of you towards me, I feel obliged to make one last point on today's themes. And that is to observe that the distinguishing spiritual quality of the Advent season is also the central competency of both the peacemaker and the repenter. That quality is listening. True listening, both to ourselves and others, involves sort of cocking our inner ear, and our intuition, for underlying meanings and subtle patterns. It is the kind of listening that Mary showed when the angel Gabriel appeared and spoke to her. While Mary was disturbed, her immediate reaction was not

immediately to blab out an answer but rather first to ponder to herself “what kind of message might this be?” That is the introspective catchcry of Advent: “What kind of message is this?”

Christmas is our liturgical season for listening anew with open hearts for a strange yet profound message of healing and peace. If we want peace within ourselves, we above all need to learn how to listen both to ourselves, and how to hear that message. Quietly.

The words of the 3rd verse of the carol ‘O little town of Bethlehem’ capture this beautifully [and this was the main reason for choosing it as our gradual hymn today] :

“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin Where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in.”

This Christmas may our understanding of the eternal coming of the Lord in our hearts and in His world deepen and broaden. May God have mercy on us all, and grant us a measure of His peace, the serene peace that truly passes all understanding. Amen.