

Division, not peace?

The first United Nations Peacekeeping effort began in 1948, when its first activity was in the Middle East to observe and maintain the ceasefire during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. Since then, United Nations peacekeepers have taken part in a total of 72 missions around the globe, 12 of which are still underway.

They have all been launched with the best of intentions, and a study carried out in 2005 found the UN to be n have been successful in two out of three peacekeeping efforts. While it seems that more often than not, the soldiers from uninvolved nations, with their distinctive blue helmets and white painted armoured cars, have made contributed to the achievement of peace in some place, the UN has also drawn criticism for perceived failures.

Today, just over than 110,000 military, police and civilian staff currently serve in fourteen peacekeeping missions around the world.

Since 1948, 4,441 UN Peacekeepers have been killed while seeking to achieve and maintain peace.

We all want peace. But the UN efforts seem to fail about a third of the time, and there's a tremendous cost in lives. What price are we prepared to pay for peace? And how do we know if we have it.

I'm reminded of Neville Chamberlain's bold declaration of "peace for our time" after meeting with Hitler and effectively giving up the Sudetenland to Nazi Germany.

And I'm reminded too, of that most famous handgun of the Old West – the Colt Single Action Army Revolver, known widely – and even affectionately – as the "Peacemaker".

I've often talked in church about human efforts towards peace in contrast to the true and lasting peace that Jesus offers us. Jesus, the Messiah, the one who was to come, was after all, named 'The Prince of peace' by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 9:6). We particularly remember that passage from Isaiah at Christmas time, and it's wonderfully brought home in Handel's oratorio, Messiah. It's a wonderful passage.

And if you read through the bible, you will find many parts that just are just lie that: there are parts that sound wonderful, parts that are encouraging, parts that are reassuring, parts that help us to understand each other and ourselves, but there are also parts which are mildly interesting, parts which are tedious, parts which make us uncomfortable, parts which are challenging, parts which are just plain scary and also some parts that just don't seem to make sense.

There's a tendency to stick with the 'good' parts, stick to what feels good and tells us what we want to hear.

But as St Augustine said, "If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you don't like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself". How does that sound?

Following on from what Augustine said, we can't simply discard parts of scripture because they don't suit us, or they don't suit contemporary society. And we also need to be careful that we don't focus on parts of scripture that do suit us, to the exclusion of the rest.

It's usually easier to preach on the gospels – to come up with a particular message to share, but the Old Testament it helps give us a better understanding of the gospels – it tells us about God's plan that was fulfilled in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. And as we read the rest of the New Testament, we see the outworking of the gospel – from the growth of the early church in the book of acts, to the vision of hope and fulfilment in the book of Revelation.

It is the one God that we encounter throughout the scriptures – Old and New Testaments alike. And God is a God who is kind and loving, but who is offended by sin, and who offers forgiveness.

This morning's reading from Luke's gospel, is one part that can be scary and challenging: it really doesn't fit with the image of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild".

The beginning of the reading, verse 49 tells us that Jesus said "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

Not "I came to save the world" but "I came to bring fire on the earth"

Fire is quick, once the fire is going it goes quickly.

Fire is one way – once something is burned, it can't be un-burned.

Fire represents passion. We can be on fire with ideas. We can burn with desire.

And fire is not gradual, incremental, consultative change. Fire is revolutionary.

So, when Jesus said, "I came to set the earth on fire", he's saying he's bringing about radical change. Jesus didn't come to make things a little bit better, but he came to make things right.

And Jesus says "...how I wish it were already kindled". Jesus is anxious to get on with his mission, to get it over with. At this stage of Luke's gospel, he is in on the way to

Jerusalem, teaching his disciples as they travel. We know now what the disciples didn't understand then – that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to be betrayed, to suffer and to die. As Jesus is teaching, he's stressing the seriousness of what's happening, the seriousness of his mission.

In verse 50, Jesus says “But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!”

Way back near the start of Luke's gospel, John the Baptist described Jesus' baptism of others as a baptism “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (3:16). What Jesus began at his own baptism – when he took his place with the people he came to save, is about to come to completion. Jesus' mission will not be easy, and it will be painful. But it is very intentional.

I reckon Jesus saying these things would have made the disciples fairly uncomfortable – but setting the earth on fire and having a baptism to receive are fairly tame compared to what comes next!

And then the crunch: Verse 51 “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.” What do we think of that? Because we know Jesus as the Prince of Peace, right? Blessed are the peacemakers and all that.

But the peace that Jesus brings, is not peace as the world understands it. It's not simply the absence of conflict between people, instead it is peace between God and people – between God and us. The peace that Jesus came to bring is salvation. Reconciliation with God.

So, for people to receive Jesus' peace, they need to accept Jesus. Those that reject Jesus don't have peace, and won't have peace.

And that is a scary thing to contemplate. But I think it is reflected in our experience, we know people who don't accept Jesus.

So people are going to always be divided. Jesus goes on to describe the extent of the division: “From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (12:52-53)

The family is such an important thing in society, but Jesus is saying those bonds will be broken by the gospel. Father vs son, mother vs daughter and so on.

But Jesus is also alluding to another change in the order of things: the way the ancient nation of Israel time viewed their relationship with God.

They were God's chosen people. The promises made to Abraham – father Abraham – in Genesis, and summed up wonderfully in Exodus 6:7 “I will make you my own people, and I will be your God.”

For the Jewish people of Jesus' time, it was a matter of claiming that inheritance. They believed they were 'right with God' because they were descendants of Abraham. But they'd become arrogant in that knowledge: God was their God, and God would look after them. They were either forgetting or ignoring the parts of the promises to Abraham that said the whole world would be blessed through them.

Of course, by the time of Jesus teaching, they'd already had John the Baptist's preaching which warned them about this. You might remember it from Luke 3 “Who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? [...] And don't start saying among yourselves that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these rocks and make descendants for Abraham! (Luke 3:7-8)

Being a descendant of Abraham, being part of the “extended family of God” isn't enough. Jesus warns that from then on families would be divided. Three against two. Two against three. Fathers against sons. Mothers against daughters. And so on.

And the 'people of God', from the son of God.

Those that accept Jesus. And those who don't.

And just like the nation of Israel couldn't rely on inherited rights, neither can we. When we think about our relationship with God, it is just that, and only that, that counts. Do we trust Jesus? Do we put our belief and faith and hope in him who dies and rose again for us? Or do we not.

It doesn't matter how long you've been going to church for, or how many times a week you go to church, or how much you give or whether you've been baptised or confirmed, or whether you're on every roster, whether you're an ordained or commissioned minister or not. (Don't get me wrong – it's all good stuff, it is good to go to church, it is good to give, it is good to help out on rosters and so on. But the key is do we put our faith in Jesus?).

Of course, this was a huge change for disciples who were listening to come to grips with, let alone the whole nation of Israel. But it was a change that John the Baptist had preached, and was now confirmed by Jesus. We need to remember though, that it wasn't a change in what God had promised.

The people should have known. They had the Old Testament. They read the scrolls of the law and the prophets regularly, they sang the psalms together. They should have known. The signs were all there.

He said to the crowd: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does.” Now clouds in the west don’t mean much to us, so we have to translate it into meteorological terms we know... so imagine this: It’s late afternoon on a summer’s day, clear blue sky above, temperature in the low 30s... and you look to the south and you see big, dark clouds looming.

You know what’s going to happen. There’ll be wind gusts, heavy rain for a short time – maybe even some hail, the skies will clear again, the temperature will have dropped by about ten degrees. It’s completely predictable – if you notice the dark clouds coming.

And so, when the people Jesus was talking to saw clouds in the west, they knew it was going to rain.

Jesus said (12:55) “And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is.” Well, our hot weather doesn’t come from the south, because that’s where our cold fronts come from, but when we feel the nor-wester blowing, then we know it’s going to get hot.

Jesus tells them that they are hypocrites who can look at the earth and the sky and predict the weather; but they look at the scriptures, and what’s happening around them, and not understand the meaning of this present time. (12:56) They should have known.

And I think it can easily be the same for us.

There are things we should know, but we don’t always get them right. We confess our sins in church, and we are reminded of God’s forgiveness, aren’t we? But how often do those sins continue to weigh on us?

And so it is with the peace that Jesus came to bring. True peace. Reconciliation between God and people. But so often we dumb that down to the world’s version of peace, something warm and fuzzy, where what is wrong with the world is simply ignored or glossed over.

But the peace Jesus came to bring does something about what is wrong with the world and deals with it. And that is God’s judgement. Things can’t be made right, without doing something about what is wrong.

Jesus’ presence is divisive. It is not Jesus’ purpose to disturb the peace, to cause division, but it is the result of people’s response to him. Some go one way, some another.

For Jesus and for his followers then and now, peace is not merely the absence of conflict. We can still be at peace with God, amidst great conflict in our lives and in our world. Peace is not a truce or a period of quiet or not talking to others. Peace is the presence of God, even amidst all the noise and tension conflict brings. Christ's peace, lasting peace, not merely temporary truce.

Our challenge then, is to put our faith in Jesus, to discern Jesus' way in the world. To remember that in this age there will always be division: division between those who accept Jesus, and those who reject him.

Jesus warned that those who chose to follow him in life would have trouble relating to those who did not so choose, and even be persecuted by them. Because the result of being a Christian is that we stand in opposition to so many of the values and practices approved of by this world. We have to realise that there is always a price to pay for standing on principle.

The good news is that Jesus paid that price, and he paid that price with his own life. Once and for all.

And in doing that, he opened the way to true and everlasting peace – for me, for you, and for all who turn to him in faith.

As we will no doubt sing again this Christmas, “Hail the heav'n born prince of peace... peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled”.

Amen