

Peace on earth?

The movie Blackhawk down tells the story of a 1993 mission during the United Nations Peacekeeping operation in Somalia by American Rangers and Delta Force. It is a great, but disturbing, movie. A carefully planned operation goes awry and the fog of war sets in. The epilogue tells viewers that in the operation 19 Americans died. And over 1,000 Somalis.

Peace was not achieved.

It was a peacekeeping mission, one of 72 since 1948. Since 1948, over 4,400 UN Peacekeepers have been killed while seeking to achieve and maintain peace.

We look at the world around us today and wonder how we can ever achieve peace – there are just so many conflicts, and so many problems to solve. We wonder what peace on earth would truly look like.

As we heard the passage from the book of Isaiah this morning, a passage that is so often read during the Advent and Christmas seasons, it is important to understand that Isaiah describes not only the birth of Jesus, but also his reign – when all will be fulfilled. Only then will the wolf live with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling dwell together. That prophecy of Isaiah, written more than 3,500 years ago still waits to be fulfilled in the future.

Isaiah's prophecy declares to the people back in his time, and to us today, the coming of the messiah, the one who Isaiah names as Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), the one who is truly the source of peace - everlasting peace.

At the beginning of today's reading, Isaiah tells us that "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit". (11:1)

Jesse was David's father, and Isaiah tells us that that out of the stump of Jesse's family tree a "shoot" or a fresh stem will sprout and that the sprout will grow and it will bear fruit.

Isaiah's prophecy is a message of hope – what has fallen away (David's line and the people of God) will be restored. The messiah will be a judge who will be righteous and faithful – and with that judgement comes forgiveness and, ultimately, peace.

It is not through people's actions – our actions – that lasting peace will come about. The source of peace is the one who Isaiah prophesies -

"The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him... He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth... Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist." (11:2-5)

In Isaiah's time, Israel was in a precarious situation. They were overshadowed by powerful neighbours who could invade at any time, and yet they chose to continue as

they were, living well (or at least the wealthy people were living well). They had no thought beyond themselves or for the future.

They didn't deserve the Messiah, and yet Isaiah tells them that they will receive the Messiah, and this Messiah will be no ordinary leader.

Isaiah tells us that spirit of the Lord will be upon this Messiah, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, so that he would make decisions on the basis of people's character not on the social standing or wealth or even simply what was easy.

And the spirit of counsel and might, too. It is only the Messiah, not the king or the priests or wise men and women, that is qualified to "give" counsel or direction or advice. The Messiah is the only one worth following.

And the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. The Messiah will know God and delight in the fear of God. He will know the awe and power of God. He will know God's plans for the world, and have reverence for all his commands.

We live in a world rife with injustice, where unfaithfulness and unrighteousness abound. We might be pretty comfortable – well-off, even – living here in St Ives and surrounds, but all these things touch us in some way. We see injustice, sometimes we are even stirred by injustice, and sometimes we might even experience injustice ourselves. We might rile against it, but we sometimes benefit from it, and sometimes we might even perpetrate it.

None of us is perfect, after all. As Paul says, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Others may have sinned against us, but we need to admit that we have sinned against others too – maybe intentionally, maybe unintentionally, maybe even unknowingly. If we are to find lasting peace, we need to realise that we ourselves are obstacles to that lasting peace. We need to repent so that we may find peace. As we pray in the Lord's prayer, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

I was talking to someone a few months ago about the middle east – Israel and Gaza, specifically, of course – but also more broadly: there are just so many conflicts and rivalries in that part of the world. Sometimes they are military conflicts – and as well as Israel-Palestine we can think of Iran-Iraq war and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, but also the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria the Houthi's in Yemen, the civil war in Syria – but there are conflicts besides.

The question came up: "When there is peace in the middle east, who do you think will get Jerusalem?" It's a reasonable question to ask, after all, Jerusalem is sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims (and I say them in that order because it's chronological). And within those groups, there is further division – for instance, within the Christians, most are either Roman Catholic or Orthodox (protestants don't have much of a presence there).

Would the UN (or someone else) decide who gets Jerusalem? Would there be a time-share arrangement (which is how Temple Mount/The Dome of the Rock has been shared

in recent years)? Or would all the people be there together, living happily shoulder-to-shoulder?

One of the most popular bible verses for Christmas cards is Luke 2:14, which is usually given as, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” Peace on earth, goodwill to men – or goodwill to all people – is a nice sentiment to have, but it’s not the full story. To put that verse in context, and to use a more accurate translation, let me share this from the New International Version: An angel of the Lord appeared to [the shepherds] and said to them, “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”” (Luke 2:11-14)

Note the difference: “Peace on earth, goodwill to all people,” against “Peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests”.

How do we find God’s favour? We can’t earn it or buy it, but we can find it in Jesus – remember Jesus said “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”

The peace that Isaiah prophesies is not peace as the world might think of it today. It is not peace achieved through negotiation or brought about by armed peacekeeping forces. It is something more, and something permanent. As Paul wrote to the Philippians (4:7), it’s “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.”

Isaiah uses imagery of that peace that the people of his time would understand clearly, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; [...] The cow will feed with the bear, [...] and the lion will eat straw like the ox.” (Isaiah 11:6-7) While they could understand those images – as can we – they had never seen those things happen. Wolves eat lambs, leopards eat goats and so on. It’s the way of the world.

But the peace of God surpasses the way of the world. It is better than anything that human effort could achieve – and yet, it is freely offered to us.

With the peace of God, though, who gets Jerusalem? God’s people does. Not the ancient nation of Israel, but all of God’s people. Isaiah tells us that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.” (11:9-10)

And it was confirmed in our New Testament reading today from Paul's letter to the Romans, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope."

Isaiah's prophecy looks beyond his own time, and he shares that even when God speaks of judgment, he also offers hope to his people. They wouldn't be destroyed and forgotten – instead God's judgment will make way for forgiveness and restoration and peace – peace which will be everlasting.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of peace, and we've been reminded of the promises of God through the words of prophet Isaiah. Words which were spoken and written down 3,500 years ago on the other side of the world. But they're words which are still for us today – as we heard at the start of our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."

Let's not simply take the words of Isaiah as prophesying the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem; but let's take them as prophesying the future that God has, though the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, in store for us – and for all creation.

We have all received a foretaste of the peace of God as we've come to know Jesus, let's know that peace in our hearts constantly, whether it's through the darkness of the world around us, through conflicts and rivalries through sickness, through sadness, or even just through the busyness of the time leading up to Christmas.

All people long for peace, so let's share the peace of God with the people around us and the whole world, as we look forward to the time when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Amen