

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Pope Francis was recently quoted as saying: "This Christmas there will be lights, parties, bright trees and even nativity scenes while the world continues to wage war. And what will remain after this war? Ruins, thousands of children without education, countless innocent victims, and lots of money in the pockets of the arms dealers. God weeps for a world that has not understood the way of peace."

He's right, there are the lights and the parties, the children re-enacting the nativity scene before their enthusiastic parents. Life, for most of us, continues as usual. But the results of war, mass migrations, and a refugee crisis on a scale the world has never seen are also part of our reality in the world. It sometimes feels as though we individuals are powerless, we can't possibly influence the problems that seem intransigent to the politicians. We can feel as helpless as the child in the manger.

You could think that this is not a good time to be preaching the coming of the Christ child, and the angel's message of peace on earth. And yet, maybe it is the best time to be thinking about this. God's prophets have always had a tendency to be counter-cultural, bringing messages that are hard to hear, and even harder to be faithful to. As we sit on the brink of war, maybe we all need to hear that message of the angels, "Peace on earth, goodwill to all mankind". And maybe we need to grapple with this, to try to understand what it means for each one of us. How can we be part of God's plan of peace? What are we called to do?

Our society has little understanding of peace. If you try and find a secular definition of peace, you come up with things like 'an absence of war', or 'the normal, nonwarring condition of a nation, group of nations, or the world'. All the definitions of peace seem to be in terms of the absence of war. And that is no definition. It diminishes peace if we cannot understand it except by the absence of war. Politicians tell us that they are seeking peace, and so both they and we should all know what peace is, what it looks like, so that we can recognise it when it has been fulfilled.

The Bible gives us a different definition of peace, which is larger, deeper and more meaningful. It comes from the Hebrew word that means "to be complete" or "to be sound, or live well." Peace is seen as wholeness of life or body; as a right relationship or harmony between two parties or peoples, often established by a covenant or agreement, and as prosperity, success, or fulfilment. It is no longer the absence of something, the absence of war. Peace itself in God's Kingdom is the best of blessings, the best way of life for everyone, not even just for humankind, but for the world in all its complexity as a whole. It is in peace that 'the lion shall lie down with the lamb'. The word most usually used for peace, 'Shalom', was used in both greetings and farewells, and was meant to act as a blessing on the one to whom it was spoken: Shalom: "May your life be filled with health, prosperity, and fulfillment."

Peace was one of the key issues for the Old Testament prophets. The false prophets proclaimed "peace, peace" (perhaps somewhat like our politicians) and just by saying the words hoped to somehow bring peace to the people (again, possibly like our politicians). But God's true prophets argued that peace could never be achieved except by bringing in righteousness and justice. So what does this mean for us? In our world riven by war, how can we work for peace? It's there in this definition, we can work for peace by working to bring about righteousness and justice, by being concerned, not just for our own rights, but for the rights of the powerless, the weak and the marginalised. If each of us was to live for peace over the next year, working to bring in righteousness and justice, the positive effect on the world would be immense.

In our Christmas readings the prophet Isaiah tells us that the nations of the world will come under the dominion of the "Prince of Peace" and "will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks". So let us take this challenge to heart and pray that next Christmas will be different. That, yes there will be lights, parties, bright trees and nativity scenes, but that it will also be a time of peace, of Shalom. Then we will live in a time of rebuilding, of children who are not just educated but also wise. Let us put a stop to the countless innocent victims who suffer as a result of war, and to the money lining the pockets of the arms dealers. And then, instead of God weeping, we will all rejoice together because this will be a time of true peace, a time when "You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands".