

Pathway to Peace – Practising Peace

Advent is a time of longing; a time of anticipation. Today and over the next three Sundays, via the prophet Isaiah, we will travel four prophetic pathways; pathways that lead to the arrival of the Christ – child, God’s answer to these longings. God’s answer for all time.

These longings speak into the reality of our world. They speak into our the realities of our church community here at Oxley-Darra.

We will walk next week, the pathway to transformation. On the 15th, we’ll walk the pathway to wholeness. Then on the 22nd, the pathway to hope ... our advent candle focus for today.

Prophetic pathways each one. On this first Sunday of Advent, we find ourselves with Isaiah on the pathway to peace.

In Isaiah 2:1-5, Isaiah offers a wonderful vision of a different world: a world in which all the nations are drawn to God’s holy mountain – Zion. Why? So they can learn the ways of peace.

In so doing, Isaiah describes God, not as some kingly ruler who reigns with brute force and domination, but rather God as teacher, as peacemaker, as mediator.

Prophets like Isaiah would boldly critique what they saw happening around them ... by offering a vision of the direct opposite. So, while kings were making unholy alliances in the plans for war, what does Isaiah speak of? Peace.

You see, war was a nearly daily part of life in ancient Israel, perhaps because of the nation’s small size – less than half the size of Tasmania – and valuable location. Ancient Israel was surrounded on all sides by nations wanting to own it. Biblical scholars remind us that in the lives of ancient Israelites, there was only “war time” and “preparing-for-war time”. So ... for Isaiah to speak of peace and pacifism is audacious indeed!

In Isaiah’s vision, all the nations of the world are drawn to God. They seek instruction in the ways of peace. From God they receive instruction; instruction in justice, in the resolution of conflict and dispute. Out of all this, their weapons of war are turned into tools of production.

The poetry in these verses is memorable indeed. On this day in which we light the “hope” candle on our advent wreath, we are taken by these verses to a place of hopefulness.

For Isaiah, these are not words of some pipe-dream ... some wishful thinking. No – Isaiah has faith that this day will come.

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Of course, we watch our TV screens, we listen to the radio, we surf the net, we read our newspapers and we’re surrounded by a different reality.

Whether it’s in Africa, ongoing tension between Israel and Palestine, or in Libya ... we don’t see too much of spears being turned into pruning hooks, swords into ploughshares. Apparently there is a list held somewhere in the world which details 44 different conflicts ongoing across planet Earth.

they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

In short, peace seems a long, long way off.

And let’s be frank. Let’s get real with ourselves and one another.

Even in our own communities. Even in our own families. Even in our own communities of faith, peace can seem a long way off. In communities, in families, in faith communities live those undercurrents we call frustration ... conflict ... unease ... hate ... exclusion ... intolerance.

Martin Luther King Jr once said much about peace ... all of this coming out of his Christian faith. King made statements like this:

Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice.

Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at the goal.

I want to suggest a couple of things in relation to this.

Firstly, and the clue is there in the first part of our Isaiah passage, this pathway to peace is tied up on our journey to God's holy place.

Isaiah paints the picture of all nations streaming toward a sacred hill ... the holy hill of Mount Zion.

For we who claim Christ as Lord, Saviour, Redeemer and Prince of Peace, we don't 'go' to a place. The 'place' to which we go is a person ... the person of Jesus Christ ... fully God, fully human, but sinless. We go to Christ who died on that sacred hill of Golgotha ... where on the tree that is ultimately the tree of life, the cross of Christ ... we, in faith experience in profound and life-changing ways the forgiving, saving love of God.

Let's never forget this and every Advent that as we journey to Bethlehem and a manger, we by extension journey to a cross and an empty tomb. For Christ comes into the world not simply to give licence to our yearly dose of Christmas carols. Christ comes to redeem, to save, to bring us back to God, to bring us in love and peace back together with one another, with our neighbour.

That's my first point.

Secondly, while in this passage God is the agent of transformation, there *is* no transformation until we turn to God. As one writer has put it; "The challenge is for us to recognize our part: that change will not come until we turn to God in order that we might learn the ways of peace."

Remember Martin Luther King's words shared before: *Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at the goal.*

Peace, it seems then, is a matter of practice. You see, Isaiah could have painted a picture of a time to come when all the nations would only lay down their weapons and live in peace. But acting out God's peace, it seems, is more than quitting conflict.

Crucial to Israel's prophecy is the more active, participatory nature of peacemaking. We must all make that journey to a common table to unlearn war and conflict.

So what might this mean to us this week as we learn the practice of peace?

Who are the ones in your family, in your community, in this church who God would want to raise up as a peacemaker? Who are the ones in our church calling us to beat our swords into ploughshares, our spears into pruning hooks?

Who are the people, in our families, our workplaces, our community, our church with whom it's time to make peace - to bury the hatchet, the dislike, the dissension, the indifference, the animosity, the cold shoulder, the figurative 'spear', and its place practice peace, to study war and conflict no more?

These are questions I call you to ... I call us as a community of faith to.

To ignore them ... to sweep them under the carpet ... in our world, in our community, in our church, as I read the scriptures is really no option at all.

In Advent we await the coming of our Lord. In Advent we walk the pathway of peace. Not *to* peace, but *of* peace.

God calls us to be people of hope, and love ... and as we focus today, of peace.

Let's not only talk about peace, let's not only sing about peace, let's not only yearn for peace, let's practise peace, let's **be** peace; peace, God's peace to a fractured, broken world

And as we **be** peace, may our peacemaking be predicated on Christ Jesus, the Prince of Peace. As Paul reminds us:

Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. [Eph 2:14]

In the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace. Amen.