

ADVENT OF PEACE

DECEMBER 7, 2008

This, the Second Sunday of Advent, causes us to look at the aspect of peace in the birth of Jesus Christ. We lit the candle of peace as our second candle of the four lit in Advent. By this act, we symbolically acknowledge that Jesus, the Christ, came into the world to be the Prince of Peace.

I want to examine the concept of peace as we find it in the Old and in the New Testaments. Peace was rarely viewed as just the absence of strife or battle though it was often used as the outcome of the ending of the battle, when peace treaties were signed.

Isaiah, the great Old Testament prophet, claimed that all peace was of God and the key condition for peace was the presence of God. He also claimed that the effect of righteousness was peace. In other words, according to Isaiah, a direct offshoot of our endeavour to live a good and righteous life was the attainment of true peace. A person of peace was a person who was just and for whom justice for all was a goal to strive to achieve. Furthermore, this context assumes that wholeness of a life includes his or her obedience to God.

You recall the word covenant being used as the relationship between God and his people. This covenant was believed to bring true peace, the peace which comes from obedience to God.

Peace was often used in the phrase “peace and blessing”. This linking of peace and blessing was central for the Old Testament people. God’s peace came with a blessing, the blessing of God on the people he chose, a people he had created.

Isaiah also combines peace and salvation. Those who trust in God and hope for his salvation, Isaiah proclaims, have peace. Israel was so often at odds with God in their behaviour and their seeming unwillingness to follow God’s direction. Therefore they often viewed their current suffering as chastisement of their peace. In other words, their suffering was to be endured before God’s true peace and justice would abide in the world. We hear this thought echoed in the words of Handel’s Messiah when the choir sings “and with his stripes”, the concept of the pain to be endured before the peace of God would surround you. Here of course the person bearing his stripes was Jesus himself, taking on the sins of the world as he suffered and died on the cross.

As we move into examining the word peace in the New Testament, the language of which originally was Greek, we see the predominance of the Hebrew word peace being used throughout. Peace was used as a greeting word and as a parting word between people of faith. We have Jesus quoted in Mark and Luke saying “Go in peace” or “Peace be with you”. Interestingly as Jesus used the word peace in these ways, he wanted his followers to use it as well. But for Jesus and his followers, the word peace was not only a salutation, but with its utterance went the actual bestowal of peace. This bestowal of peace could be accepted or rejected freely by the one who received it.

This greeting of peace which is offered by the Christian is assumed to come from God. Thus it became known as the “peace of God” as God himself is the God of Peace. The New Testament writers, particularly Paul, added further meaning to this concept of the peace of God which we experienced and passed on to others.

Luke, in his writings known as the Acts of the Apostles and Paul in his letters, view peace as the reconciliation which Christ has brought about between Jews and Gentiles, groups who were normally antagonistic towards one another. Peace was to be the norm between Christians, between men and women and between husband and wife.

An additional meaning related to the New Testament is the concept of right relationships between man and God. Before one’s conversion to Christianity, a person was alienated from God. In Christ, this right relationship has been set right once again. Men and women are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. We have peace with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus our Lord. God has made peace we say through the blood of the cross.

The last new concept concerning peace in the New Testament relates to the sense of “peace of mind or serenity”. This is new. This gift of peace is explicitly offered in contrast to the troubled and fearful hearts of the disciples. In Philippians we read that “the peace of God...will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

You will recall that the term peacemaker is often used by Jesus. In the Beatitudes, we hear “blessed are the peacemakers”. This is not a referral to those who primarily spread cheer and good will; but to those who create peace where there is hatred, who reconcile where there is separation. These are deemed in scripture “the sons of God” who draw upon the peace they have been given by God to reunite the estranged. The peace which they offer can only be reconciliation through Christ. This reconciliation requires that we give our all to Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Our first reading this morning was that wonderful well known passage from the Prophet Isaiah. This passage is deemed by Christians from the time of St. Paul and John the Baptist, to foretell the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

It begins with the words: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Here we have peace tied in with comfort and peace of mind. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” True peace in other words that comes with reconciliation between God and his people, a people who had fallen away from God and had now passed through a time of turmoil and fear. Isaiah proclaims God is the giver of true comfort and true peace.

Most of us have been raised on the wonderful verses which ring out in Handel’s great Oratorio Messiah. These words speak to the momentous time when the intervention of God directly in history will occur. Christians believe these words foretold the coming of Jesus the Christ. Jews still wait in anticipation for this coming event.

When the Messiah comes, every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain brought low. In other words, the world will be turned on its head and everything will be changed. This is not meant to be a small earthquake but a tsunami, a tidal wave of change.

There is so much beauty in this passage. “Behold the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him’. All powerful is our God and nothing can stand before his power. And then come these wondrous words: “he will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”

Can you blame Handel for being inspired by these passages, these passages which spell out the power of God and yet the gentleness of God as well? These two traits were to be the mark also of the one who would be born messiah, the baby of Bethlehem, the one we prepare to meet in Bethlehem.

Handel wrote the Oratorio in very few weeks. He claimed the majesty of the subject called out to be presented in grand form. Indeed, the majesty and wonder of God does call out for us to acknowledge his power and love in a grand way.

In our Gospel reading from the Book of Mark, we have the words of Isaiah being recalled again. Mark starts his Gospel you remember with these words: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight ..”

Then Mark goes on to tell the story of John the Baptist calling people to repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. John was out in the desert away from urban or farming centres. People came in droves to see and hear this man. John was quick to quote Isaiah, not so that he would have validity, but to put in context of scripture his role as the messenger to prepare the way for Jesus. This is the one you have been waiting for, he proclaimed. Repent of your sins, turn back to God and be ready to greet the one for whom we have waited for centuries, the one who is indeed the Son of God.

Today, you and I begin once again to reenact the birth of the Messiah, the one for whom the world had waited for so long to arrive. We should never trivialize these preparations nor should we become blasé about them. People who waited for so long would envy us for not only do we know of the significance of the life of Jesus, but we also know the outcome of that life, the unexpected ending which saw the Christ tortured and crucified and laid in a tomb. We have the good fortune to be able to celebrate this birth with eyes wide open for know that the world while waiting for him received him not but rather rid themselves of his presence, condemning him to death. We know God raised him from the dead and in time sent us his Holy Spirit to dwell with us always.

Peace, a great gift of God. Peace which causes us to be still and open for God to speak. Peace which reconciles us to God. Peace which is the great gift of God to assure us of his love for us and his capacity to forgive, to motivate and to urge into action.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Thanks be to God. Amen

Rev. Gary Magarrell