



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 19th December, 2023

"How do we speak of peace?"

"GOD in the ordinary"

"The teachings of Jesus reflect his very ordinariness by being with people in their life situations. He told stories about farmers sowing crops, travellers, housewives, fishermen, birds looking for food, tax collectors, lilies in the fields, disobedient children, weddings and unjust stewards.

As a child growing up in Nazareth, he never lost the common touch with ordinary people. By grounding his teachings in everyday happenings, Jesus wished to highlight that GOD is present in the very banal things of life.

As Paula D'Arcy would say, '*GOD comes to us disguised as our life*'. The incarnation reminds Christians that there are not two realms of reality. The spiritual and material are one in GOD's sight".

Kevin Treston

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## Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of GOD.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight' ,*

### *"How do we speak of peace... ?"*

That's only half the question. Or, at least, it's only half the question I've been asking myself these last few weeks as I thought about today in church, and the theme of peace. The rest of the question, for me, has been: *"... without it sounding like a sick joke?"*

That brings the mood down, doesn't it? But if my Witness to the Word isn't honest, it has nothing to offer. So here goes.

I'm finding it really hard to look around the world this year, and think about peace.

In one sense, I'm not sure why that is, not that much has changed:

We've been praying for peace in the birthplace of Jesus my whole life – and longer.

There were all those years we prayed for peace in Northern Ireland, during 'the troubles'.

With people from South Sudan, Congo, and Ethiopia, I've prayed for peace in their homelands.

I know that many of you have lived through war, and prayed and worked for peace.

It's not new!

Jesus was born in occupied territory under the heel of empire.

At that time it was Rome, but there were many others before – and since!

These last few years we've been deeply affected by the Russian attack on Ukraine and the war that's followed, and then by the Hamas attack on Israel. And I think that's the situation that has affected me most deeply, and I've worked out why:

It's because the world is being told that we are on one 'side' or the other, with disregard for the incredible complexity of the situation there – or of the humanity involved.

Let me say straight out: I condemn utterly the illegal Hamas attacks on Israel in October. At the same time, I also condemn the illegal Israeli settlements in Gaza and the West Bank, and the brutal way in which Israel has treated the Palestinian people in these enclaves.

I can't say I 'understand' Hamas or the militant Palestinians, I can't begin to comprehend that, or the fear so prevalent in Israel. But I do know there's more to it than simple terrorism, and Israel's right to defend itself.

And I know that it's more about politics than religion. It made sense to me recently when I heard U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders, who is Jewish, say that it's not anti-semitic to criticize the secular right-wing State of Israel.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about this recently; thinking about how I – with no 'skin in the game' other than my shared humanity – about how I – as a follower of the way of Jesus – can possibly respond in a way which is more than glib or trite. *"How do we speak of peace?"*

I don't have clear or clever answers, but I have a couple of thoughts which I dare to hope are helpful and Spirit-led.

Firstly, one prompted by seeing this image:

It's from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. They have very deliberately created a nativity scene out of rubble. People can light the candles that surround the nativity, as a prayer for light in the darkness of this crisis.



Bethlehem is not in Gaza. By paying attention to their shared humanity rather than ignoring it, this church and its people say a whole lot about the way of Jesus!

The second thought has to do with an anniversary. Today marks the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1948.

I've been thinking about the impact of this on the world, coming as it did just after the horrors of the Second World War.

I wonder what the declaration changed: for whom it has changed life and how,

Has it empowered peace-making in the world?

Who and what has pushed back against such a declaration - why?

Why doesn't Australia have such a declaration, and what would change here if we did?

Again, perhaps more questions than answers, but my thinking led me to one very clear thought about 'rights', peace, and Jesus.

People ask 'What would Jesus do?', which is a bit speculative for me:

I think it's better to start with "what DID Jesus do?", and here we have a clear answer.

For him, people had a right to be regarded as human beings of value, and to be treated as such.

We see this in (nearly) all his dealings with people in the gospels, and in the people among whom he lived.

And we see it in the way he challenged and confronted people, institutions, and empire, when they de-humanised people – particularly when it was done in the name of GOD.

A few weeks ago, the day after the Referendum, I said these words in relation to the fractured state of our nation:

*"Blessed are the peacemakers – we're going to need them.  
We're going to need to BE them"*

I hold those words up again, to myself and to you. They're true for all who follow the way of Jesus, where we are and however we can.

There's so much we can't fix, just as there was for him. His way was to attend to what he could do, rather than be overwhelmed by what he couldn't, and to find the Spirit of GOD there.

I hold up other words too: words we find in John's Gospel as part of his resurrection stories, when the risen Christ appeared to bewildered and frightened disciples:

*"Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, so I send you".*

Or as the old song puts it: *"Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."*

And there, I find my hope and my inspiration to speak of peace, and perhaps you do too: may it be so.

Amen

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