

Luke 2.8-20

Peace on Earth?

Amington Parish Church

Sunday 22 December 2019

Carols by Candlelight

Shalom

I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear the word 'peace'? 'Give peace a chance'? 'Peace and quiet'? 'Peace? Peace? Haven't you heard it's Christmas?!'

The 'peace' that Jesus is Prince of, is unlike any other. It's a bit like the deep and still ocean – no matter what's happening on the surface, whether it's calm or the world's worst hurricane, if you go deep enough, the ocean is still and quiet. That's like the peace – or *shalom* – that Jesus is Prince of.

The Angels

One of the highlights of 2019 for me, was watching Ben Stokes' heroics first in the Cricket World Cup final, and then in the Ashes. It was amazing to watch, and no wonder he won BBC SPOTY.

But the other memory I have of the Cricket World Cup is the *semi-final*, when England walloped Australia at Edgbaston. The noise of the crowd singing *Sweet Caroline* – wow. If you’ve ever been to a live sports event and heard the crowd sing like that, it’s really something special.

But – whether it’s *Sweet Caroline* at Edgbaston, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* at Twickenham, or *Abide with me* at the FA Cup Final – I think the shepherds had it best. There they were on the hillside, minding their own business, **keeping watch over their flocks at night** (8), when suddenly, not one or two, but a **great company of angels** appeared to them, **praising God** (13). It must have been spine-tingling, incredible, awe-inspiring, almost overwhelming.

And this is what they sang:

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and **on earth peace** to those on whom his favour rests.’

Luke 2.14 (NIV)

There’s the message of Christmas right there: not *Elf on the shelf* or *I saw mummy kissing Santa Claus*, but **peace on earth**. Three simple words: **peace on earth**. It’s a lovely message, and I’m sure few would disagree with it.

Really?

But here's the problem: if Jesus came to bring peace on earth, where is it? Not a day goes by without the news mentioning war, fighting, death, famine, disease, struggle. There are places in the world where to meet like this in the name of Jesus, to worship and sing carols together – well, we'd all be rounded up, arrested, and almost certainly killed.

Closer to home, our Prime Minister said recently that the country needs to come together after the painful fighting and arguments over Brexit. Whatever you think of Boris – on this he is correct. There is very little peace in our country – and it's not only politics: in the UK an incident of domestic violence is reported to the police once every minute – and something like two-thirds of incidents are *never* reported.

If Jesus came to bring world peace – then after two thousand years, he has failed – big time.

Looking in the wrong place

So were the angels wrong? Were they lying? Were they making a politician's promise? Or are we missing something?

I wonder if you've ever lost something, and turned your house upside-down looking for it? Recently I lost this green bottle. I drink a lot (of water), so use it frequently. I searched everywhere for it – every room of the vicarage, in my car, down here at church – and couldn't find it. Why? Because I was looking in the wrong place – it turns out I had left it at Amington Heath Primary School after a governors' meeting.

If we think the angels were singing about 'world peace', that's like looking for my green bottle in the vicarage, when actually it's in a school office. We are looking in the wrong place, so we'll *never* find what we're looking for.

Because actually, Jesus *himself* said he wasn't bringing world peace. Before he died, he made this famous prophecy to his disciples:

'When you hear of wars, and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.'

Mark 13.7-8 (NIV)

That prophecy has spent 2,000 years coming true time and again: Jesus was not born in Bethlehem to bring world peace – not yet.

But hang on a minute – isn't Jesus the Prince of Peace?

‘Jesus is our peace’

Remember that deep ocean stillness? Whatever happens on the surface, deep, deep down, the ocean is... *still*. And *that* is the peace – *shalom* – that Jesus brings. We need such deep peace, because we all have a problem, a problem deep within ourselves.

You see, whatever the surface of our lives might look like – successful, struggling, good, bad, happy, sad – deep down our hearts are full of selfishness, self-centredness, brokenness – our hearts are full of a desire to do what Sinatra sang: ‘I did it my way.’

That song resonates with people – why? – because it speaks to the pride we all have, deep within us. We were created by God, and he has told us the way to live, the way to live life to the full – but the human heart wants to ‘do it my way’ – not *his* way. We – the creature – think we know better than God – the Creator.

The Bible calls this ‘sin’, and it is a deep, deep problem – or a ‘pit’, as the Bible puts it – a pit we’ve dug for ourselves, and from which we cannot escape without help.

We are all of us stuck, in a deep pit of our own making, far away from God. That is the truth, and it is bad news. Merry Christmas everyone. *Pause* **But** the angel told the shepherds...

‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you.’

Luke 2.10-11 (NIV)

Jesus is that Saviour, the rescuer, God’s own Son, who did not stay far off in heaven, but came down to earth, to reach down into the pit and pick us up, to lift us out. In Jesus God comes to us, so he can be with us, and we with him – *this* is peace.

St Paul put it like this:

For [Jesus] is our peace... His purpose was to reconcile... [us] to God through the cross... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

Ephesians 2.14-17 (NIV)

The peace of Jesus is reconciliation: peace between us and God.

Today, whether you feel far away, or whether you feel near – Jesus can lift you out of the pit, he can bring you peace with God, *shalom* – the deep stillness, deep below the surface, peace that lasts. This is why the angel said Jesus’ birth was **‘good news, of great joy’** – because the peace he brings is *exactly what we need*.

‘God and sinners, reconciled’

Earlier we sang my favourite carol, *Hark! The herald angels sing*.
And what *do* they sing?

Hark! The herald angels sing,
‘Glory to the new-born king!
Peace on earth, and mercy mild:
God and sinners, reconciled.’

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)
‘Hark! The herald angels sing’, 1739

Peace on earth, that is the message of Christmas in a nutshell: not world peace, but **God and sinners, reconciled**.

We are the sinners: Jesus is God. He doesn’t expect or want us to be perfect, to lift ourselves out of the pit – *he* comes to *us*. *He* comes to *us*, to lift us up, to bring us peace, to bring us *home*.

God’s gift to you this Christmas – and every day – is his Son Jesus. God’s gift to you is peace – reconciliation – *shalom* – a rescuer to pick you up, and bring you back home again.

I wonder, what will *you* do with that gift, this Christmas? Will you pack it away with the tinsel and the baubles, and forget about it until next year?

Or will you spent 2020 discovering the true meaning of God's love and mercy and forgiveness, given to us in his Son Jesus?

Heavenly Father, thank you for loving us so much that you sent Jesus to reconcile us to one another, and to you. May we know your peace this Christmas, and respond to your precious gift of Jesus with all our hearts. Amen.

Intercessions

Loving and heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the world you have given us, with all its beauty and goodness and abundance.

We are sorry for the times we have not looked after it as we should, and ask you to give us the strength and will to be good stewards of all you've given us. We ask you to give our politicians and leaders the courage to seek what is best, not for themselves, but for all.

We thank you for all those in the emergency services who will be working over the Christmas period, keeping us safe and well.

We ask your blessing and comfort to all those for whom Christmas is not a time of celebration, especially those who are alone, isolated, or bereaved. Father, may we be mindful of those who are hungry, thirsty, and cold, even as we enjoy Christmas dinner, mulled wine, and warm homes.

Above all, may you shine your light – the light of Jesus – into our hearts and minds, and through us, into all the darkest places of the world. May we receive and share your forgiveness and life with all.

May the truth that Jesus is God, God with us, God among us, God as one of us, God forgiving us – may that truth be the solid rock, the foundation on which we stand and build our lives.