

Blessed are the peacemakers

Readings: Psalm 146: 6-10, Micah 2:1-5 & Matthew 5: 9-10.

We have just celebrated the season of peace. Maybe you were here when we lit the second Advent candle – the candle of peace. Maybe you sung Hark the Herald Angels Sing or even John Lennon's Happy Christmas (War is Over). Some of us even like to retell the WWI story of when the British, French, and German soldiers stopped fighting on Christmas Day and exchanged presents, sung carols, and played a rousing game of football. And most importantly we celebrated the birth of the Prince of Peace. Yet there doesn't seem to be much peace in the world. After 2000 years you would think we'd have this peace thing sorted out by now. But we haven't.

We have to understand that there is a fundamental difference between how we think of peace in the modern West and how the ancient Jews understood it. We tend to think of it in a negative form – as the absence of disturbance or violence. In contrast, the biblical Jewish culture thought of it in a positive form – as the presence of harmony, justice, and joy. The Jewish word for peace is *shalom* and it refers to a state in which “all is as it should be”. It refers to having right relationships with God and your fellow humans, to a state in which all people flourish (not to be confused with slalom!).

The other concept we have to understand is that of righteousness. This is another word that we use slightly differently today. In fact, we most often use it to refer to people who are hypocritical and arrogant – those who are self-righteous. In a positive sense we say that being righteous is being right with God. But the biblical definition is a little more nuanced. Interestingly enough the two words the Bible uses for righteousness, the Hebrew *tzadik* and the Greek *dikaioné*, translate as both righteousness and justice. And this is because righteousness is very closely tied to justice. But this is not justice in the modern sense of criminals being punished. It's closer to fairness, wrongs being righted, and the most vulnerable members of the community being protected. Consider that in the two Old Testament readings today God is described as someone who takes up the cause of the oppressed, disabled, widows and orphans, and promises to bring disaster on those who plot evil against the vulnerable.

And now we can get an idea of what a peacemaker is. The Greek word used in this passage is *eirenoios* which means, funnily enough, peacemaker. Contrary to what a certain group of British scholars have suggested, it does not mean cheesemakers. But it also doesn't mean peacekeepers. There is a vital difference between a peacekeeper and a peacemaker. Peacekeepers tend to be afraid of rocking the boat. Peacekeepers avoid conflict and allow it to grow into an ugly situation. A peacemaker is different. Peacemakers seek long term justice even if it means conflict in the short term. A peacemaker seeks to right wrongs even if it makes them unpopular. A peacemaker seeks the good of all people.

In fact, a good illustration of the difference between peacekeepers and peacemakers was summed up recently by the writer Naomi Shulman: “Nice people made the best Nazis. Or so I have been told. My mother was born in Munich in 1934, and spent her childhood in Nazi Germany surrounded by nice people who refused to make waves. When things got ugly, the people my mother lived alongside chose not to focus on “politics,” instead busying themselves with happier things. They were lovely, kind people who turned their heads as their neighbours were dragged away. You know who weren't nice people? Resisters.”

And we may groan when politics is brought up but we have to remember that Jesus operated and taught within a culture with distinct political ideas and tensions. Chief of these political ideas was to Make Israel Great Again. And four main Jewish political groups sprung up in response to this question of how to do so.

The first was the Zealots and their offshoot group the Sicarii. Their approach was to take back the land using violence and terror. The Sicarii in particular were known for murdering Jews who opposed using violence against the Romans.

The second group was the Sadducees. They were the elite priestly caste which was tasked with maintaining the Temple in Jerusalem. Their approach to the Roman occupation was “if you can’t beat them, join them” and they often sided with Roman policies over Jewish interests which tended to make them unpopular with the common man.

The third group were the Pharisees – one that we are familiar with from their conflicts with Jesus. They realised that the reason that they didn’t control the land was because Israel had disobeyed God and turned away from His Law. So their approach was to become hypervigilant in policing the morality of the Jews. They created a series of new rules to follow and shunned contact with non-Jews. But they were also known for their hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Jesus famously accused them of making showy prayers while devouring the houses of widows. Those who remember my sermon on John 8 where Jesus stopped the stoning of the woman caught in adultery might remember that her lover was not brought forth for punishment because there existed a double standard of “boys will be boys”.

The fourth and final group were the Essenes. Disgusted with the corruption of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees they withdrew to the desert to live in communities separate from the world and the wider culture.

So here we have four main responses to the political woes of the day – violence, collaboration in which one sells out their ideals in exchange for power, hyper moralisation, and withdrawal. But Jesus offers a fifth way – the way of reconciliation. Jesus’ whole ministry was built around reconciliation – reconciliation of God and humans and reconciliation of humans with humans. Is it any wonder that Jesus spent most of his ministry with the sick, the poor, and the oppressed?

Traits of a peacemaker

A tough mind and a tender heart

When I think of a modern peacemaker the first example that comes to mind is Martin Luther King Jr. And if you ever get the chance I would highly recommend reading his 1959 sermon on Matthew 10:16 titled A Tough Mind and A Tender Heart. In it he identifies two dangers. The first is that society has a tendency towards softmindedness; we prefer to be fed easy answers over doing hard thinking. This leads to our minds being vulnerable to prejudice, irrational fears, and false facts. King states that “A nation or a civilisation that continues to produce softminded men purchases its own spiritual

death on an instalment plan”.¹ The answer is that we must pursue the hard journey of seeking truth and wisdom if we are to break free from softmindedness.

The other danger is in being tough hearted. The tough hearted individual is cold and loveless, incapable of seeing others as anything other than tools of varying value. The tough hearted individual is incapable of being moved by the suffering of others. Softmindedness leads to people accepting injustice as something they just have to adjust too and hardheartedness leads to people who spread hate and use violence to achieve their goals.

Softmindedness like the Sadducees and toughheartedness like the Zealots.

In contrast, King reminds us, the Gospel invites us to imitate a God who is both toughminded and tenderhearted. God is toughminded in His justice who will right wrongs and punish wrongdoers but He is also tenderhearted in the grace and love He offers sinners. Consider the example of the Jesus we see in the gospels – the Jesus who had harsh words for the hypocritical and self-righteous Pharisees but spoke with gentleness to the outcasts who had fallen by the wayside.

Peacemakers are outward focused

King recalls an elderly segregationist in the South saying “I have come to see now that desegregation is inevitable. But I pray God that it will not take place until after I die”.² Or remember the earlier anecdote about how nice people made the best Nazis because they were willing to look the other way when others were suffering. These peacekeepers were inwardly focused – they desired to make their own lives comfortable at the expense of others. Peacemakers are outwardly focused both in their relationships with others and with God. Peacemakers are attentive to the voice of God and the obedience to follow through. Consider the example of the Old Testament prophets and their willingness to confront Israel and Judah on God’s behalf. Peacemakers are also sensitive to the needs of others.

Peacekeepers often protect the status quo; peacemakers listen to the voice of God for where there needs to be change. Often the status quo benefits select groups at the expense of others. Peacemakers see where this is the case and work to challenge the status quo, even if they benefit from the preservation of the status quo. And this leads to...

Peacemakers are often divisive

One of the things I have noticed in Christian circles lately is that when someone speaks out on an issue of justice it is often met with an admonition to “stop being divisive”. And don’t get me wrong, unity is a wonderful thing. But sometimes the work of peacemaking requires the peacemaker to be divisive and confront our communities with uncomfortable truths until reconciliation takes place. As Thomas Trzyna writes in *Blessed are the Pacifists*: “Peacemakers are honoured insofar as they speak

¹ Martin Luther King, *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*, The King Legacy Series (Boston: Beacon Press, ©2012), 4.

² Martin Luther King, *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*, The King Legacy Series (Boston: Beacon Press, ©2012), 3.

about peace as something already victoriously won that we can celebrate as part of our glorious past or as something that will be won in the other world. They continue to be dishonoured insofar as they continue to point out injustice, hypocrisy, and suffering. They are noble when their actions bring to light problems far away from us; they are an odious nuisance when they point out our own sins”.

The fact is that those who seek to be peacemakers and stand for righteousness and justice for “the other” often sacrifice comfort and popularity in their communities. Although many like to view King as a cuddly man with a dream they often forget that he was jailed 29 times for his activism and was labelled a moral degenerate, even by his fellow Christians, before he was finally murdered on April 4th, 1968. Jesus, the ultimate model of a peacemaker, was deeply unpopular amongst the religious leaders of his day because he challenged the authority they claimed. And they killed him for it. But not before they dragged the Peacemaker before a peacekeeper. When faced with an angry crowd, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate opts to let a man he knows is innocent go to his death. And writing on this, theologian Miroslav Volf writes: “Pilate deserves our sympathies, not because he was a good though tragically mistaken man, but because we are not much better. We may believe in Jesus, but we do not believe in his ideas, at least not his ideas about violence, truth, and justice.”

And this is the part where we move from lofty ideals recorded 2000 years ago to our calling as followers of Christ.

Over the past few months many have looked on in horror as a man who ran on a platform of racism, xenophobia, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and fear of the other became one of the most powerful men in the world. The election exposed deep divisions in America and especially within the American church as millennial, black, and Latino believers struggled to come to terms with the results. But this is not an isolated phenomenon. Political analysts have spilled much ink warning us of the rise of nationalistic populism throughout the West as we become more and more hateful towards each other as societies. And I’ve seen this in New Zealand. The truth is that we’re living in societies full of people who are deeply afraid of each other. The past few decades have brought a time of unprecedented technological development and increasingly diverse communities at a blindingly fast speed. And unfortunately we haven’t always known how to handle that. So there’s this temptation to go back to an idea of a “society that was” even if that idealised society never really existed. Maybe it’s like the Southern segregationist who saw that the Black Civil Rights Movement was going to win but desperately wanted to hold on to his comfortable world. But the world is going to keep changing for better or for worse. And that’s scary for everyone. And there are going to be people that stand to benefit from keeping people afraid of each other, be they corrupt politicians, terrorists, white supremacists, criminals, corrupt businessmen, and even corrupt religious leaders. And that is where Christ comes in. The same Christ who broke down barriers between Jew and Gentile, men and women, slaves and freemen, the elite and the poor. The same Christ we are called to follow and mirror to others.

And this peacemaking doesn’t start in Parliament. Jesus could have gone to Rome and made his case at the Senate but he didn’t. Instead he travelled around towns in a backwater part of the Roman Empire, focusing on ordinary people and the outcasts and showed them love and taught them how to follow him. Christ-centred peacemaking starts in our families, our workplaces, our schools, our small groups, our sports teams, and our community. I have read three stories in the past month that have driven this home for me and given me hope. The first is the story of Christian Picciolini who at

the age of 14 encountered and befriended the first adult who ever cared about him – a neo-Nazi skinhead. Picciolini would go on to a leader in the American skinhead movement, internalising its belief that it was resisting a secret plot to commit genocide of the white race and stockpiling weapons. This went on until he opened a record store and started to have polite conversations with his African-American and Jewish customers in order to keep their business. As a result of these humanising conversations with the people he hated he left the white supremacist movement at the age of 22. He has spent the last two decades speaking in schools to students on how to avoid falling into these groups.

The second is the story of Derek Black, born into a prominent white supremacist family and the godson of the infamous David Duke – the former head of the KKK. For a long time Black was expected to be Duke's heir. But while attending university, Black reluctantly agreed to go to weekly Shabbat dinners hosted by Matthew Stevenson – an Orthodox Jew he studied with. There he would form friendships with those he was taught to hate and two years later he publicly denounced the white supremacist movement.

The third and final is Daryl Davis – a Black blues musician who has led 200 members of the KKK out of the group in the past 30 years simply by asking them the question “how can you hate me if you don't even know me?” and offering his friendship to them.

All three of these stories of peacemaking start with people having the courage to start conversations and end with reconciliations.

2000 years ago Jesus stood on a mountaintop and addressed a crowd of people who were suffering in a deeply fragmented society and said “blessed are those who make peace, for you shall be called children of God”.

And today Jesus says to us “blessed are those who make peace, for you shall be called children of God”.

Link to Martin Luther King Jr's “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart”:

<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/tough-mind-and-tender-heart-1>