

Sunday 16 January 2011

THE PEACE OF JESUS

In Edinburgh late last year Lynda and I were lucky enough see the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the SCO Chorus performing Handel's *Messiah*. Handel wrote the *Messiah* in the space of just a few weeks between August and September 1741, with its first performance in Dublin, where he was living at the time. The libretto for *Messiah* was designed and selected from the New and Old Testaments by a man named Charles Jennens (1700-73), a scholar educated at Balliol College, Oxford.

Amongst the many remarkable aspects of this work are the words (taken from Isaiah. 9.6):

“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”



Georg Friedrich Händel

The Prince of Peace ! This relates very much to our theme today, which is - THE PEACE OF JESUS.

In Romans 5 (v1-2) we are told that we have been made right in God's sight because of our faith. It is thanks to our faith in what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us, that we have peace with God. And from Isaiah 26 (v 3): 'You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose thoughts are fixed on you'.

Chambers definition of 'peace' informs us that it is: a state of quiet; freedom from disturbance; freedom from war; ease of mind or conscience; tranquillity; quiet; and stillness.



Many regimes (including ours!) choose war, not peace

In a biblical sense peace means various things, including: a calm repose (i.e. freedom from worry); eternal rest (after death); free of strife or discord; and harmony in personal relationship, especially with God. The latter meaning seems to be especially important.

In further discussion of these meanings I want to consider 4 aspects of Peace in relation to Christian belief and its relevance to our lives today:

- **Peace of Jesus - at Christmas**
- **Peace of Jesus - instead of war or conflict**
- **Peace of Jesus - for those who are ill or suffering**
- **Peace of Jesus - for those whose burden is great**

Peace (at Christmas)

At Christmas time all roads lead home. Family and friends return.

Joseph received a word from God. That is what we need when our lives spin out of control. When life is filled with uncertainty, God's Word can be trusted. God's message to Joseph was designed to do two things:

1. To replace his fear and confusion with peace, and
2. To assure him that God was in control.

Everything that was happening was according to plan. If Joseph would allow God to be in control, God would be responsible for bringing peace.

Our lives offer no surprises, doubts, uncertainties, or fears to God. He is in control. Just as He knew what was happening in Nazareth, he knows what is happening with us wherever we are. And He knows what to say to bring peace into our houses, at Christmas or at any other time.

Imagine - You are standing up to your knees in the slime of a waterlogged trench. It is the evening of 24 December 1914 and you are on the dreaded Western Front.

You stamp your feet in a vain attempt to keep warm. All is quiet when jovial voices call out from both friendly and enemy trenches. Then the men from both sides start singing carols and songs. Next come requests not to fire, and soon the unthinkable happens: you start to see the dark shapes of soldiers gathering together in no-man's land laughing, joking and sharing gifts.

Many have exchanged cigarettes, the lit ends of which burn brightly in the semi darkness. Plucking up your courage, you haul yourself up and out of the trench and walk towards the foe...

The meeting of enemies as friends in no-man's land was experienced by hundreds, if not thousands, of men on the Western Front during Christmas 1914. That event was seen as a shining episode of sanity from among the bloody chapters of World War One - a spontaneous effort by the lower ranks to create a peace that could have blossomed

were it not for the interference of generals and politicians. You can imagine the questions they must have been asking, like: why are we here? What are we all fighting for? Many believed it would all soon be over – but they were sadly mistaken.



Christmas 1914: The Western Front

We might also ask ourselves how we can use that event to bring peace and goodwill to this world that is shaken each day by military activities, tyranny or oppression somewhere or other. A world where the powerful exploit the weak; a world where violence has become an accepted means of entertainment; a world where goodwill refers to money paid as bribes.

We need to work to bring about the reign of God, where peace, love and justice flourish. Peace is a gift from God and it is important first of all to welcome it. As Saint Ambrose said:

"Begin the work of peace in yourself so that, once at peace yourself, you can bring peace to others".

At Christmas time we recognize the presence of God in the child lying in the manger and we welcome his peace, and with it the hope of peace for the world. God sends us to communicate this peace around us. Our world needs courageous men and women who express by the lives they lead the Gospel's call to reconciliation, and peace.

Peace (instead of war or conflict)

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, receiving the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize said: "It is clear that global challenges must be met with an emphasis on peace, in harmony with others". He went on to say: "To suggest that war can prevent war is a play on words and a despicable form of warmongering. The objective of any who sincerely believe in peace clearly must be to exhaust every honorable recourse in the effort to save the peace. The world has had ample evidence that war begets only conditions that beget further war."



War tends to be a vicious circle

But even Mr. Carter was not accurate in all his assertions: he called for Iraq to comply fully with the decision of the UN Security Council that it eliminate all weapons of mass destruction (of which it was found that

there were none). None of us are perfect, not even Nobel Peace Prize Winners.

In turn this raises questions about the dubious motives of our own elite for waging war in Iraq, and Afghanistan; the people in these nations needed aid and trade, not an invasion by military forces, which has only resulted in far greater carnage, and greater mistrust of the West, with the West itself becoming a target for revenge attacks. War begets more war.

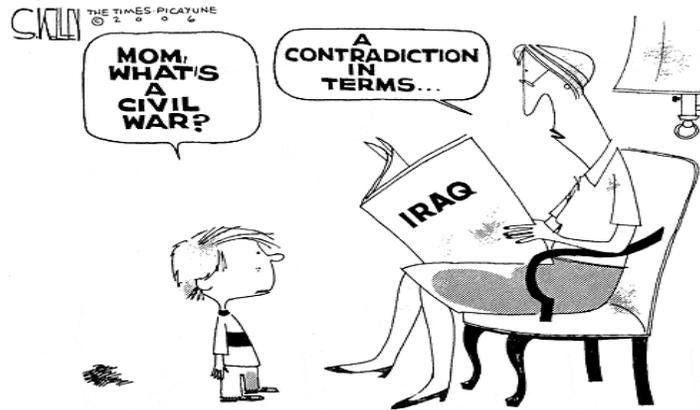
‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; for unto us a son is given, the Prince of Peace.’ Isaiah’s words are all the more poignant, according to the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright, when we think of the sons and daughters who were given – born, nurtured, loved, sent off to school, delighted in as they developed powers of mind and body – and then cut down on the very threshold of a long and fruitful life in wars few of us really consider necessary, far less desirable.

Bishop Wright suggested that War memorials are always moving; war memorials in a school are like an unfinished symphony, a sonnet whose first eight lines never knew the last six that would make full sense of them. Rabbis say that he who kills a man/woman kills a whole world; who knows what that person might have done, the children they might have had, the beauty they might have created?

‘Unto us a son is given, the Prince of Peace’; and of course the double irony here is that when the Prince of Peace finally arrived he too was cut down in his prime, as the brutal military empire of the first century did what brutal military empires have always done.

There is the double problem of tyranny on the one hand and violence on the other. Of course they often go together, as tyrants regularly use violence to gain and maintain their position. But, as the Roman Emperors claimed, when you have a strong ruler you have peace – albeit at a price. Conversely, when people who suffer oppression and injustice, or who face national danger seek

a solution, they often make war. It's quite easy to have peace if you're happy to settle for injustice. Then again, it's quite easy to work for justice if you're happy to do without peace.



We know the stories of the Somme, of Dunkirk, of Bagdad and Helmand, just as Isaiah's listeners knew the stories of the old battles; and the point of the famous victory over the Midianites was that it wasn't a battle at all. We can read about that in the book of Judges. Gideon and his men surrounded the camp by night, blew their trumpets and waved their torches, and the tyrannical Midianites fled in panic. Justice was re-established without violence.

That is our challenge - to see that justice is attained without violence, and peace attained without accompanying tyranny. The world today is still wondering how to achieve that result. The media often does not help matters, with 'embedded' journalists telling the story the way the authorities want it told.

We have much to learn from Vaclav Havel's Velvet Revolution; a six-week period between November and December, 1989, which brought about the bloodless overthrow of the Czechoslovak communist regime. It started with students in the capital city of Prague protesting an oppressive regime, followed by massive demonstrations of almost 750,000 people at Letna Park in Prague on November 25 and 26, and by the general strike on the 27th;

these events were devastating for the communist regime. Nonviolent people protest won the day; even Gandhi would have been proud.

Time was then spent dividing the common property that the two partners in the Czechoslovak Federation shared. The breakup of Czechoslovakia was painful and a little bit messy, but it was as amicable as could be under the circumstances. Czechoslovakia peacefully ceased to exist on December 31, 1992, after which two states came into being – the Czech Republic and Republic of Slovakia, with both then becoming EU member states in 2004.

Recently I have been reading a book, by Professors Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig, which investigates the reasons for the First World War ('Decisions for War 1914-1917', 2004). It stresses the fundamental role of a very small elite group in each of the 12 countries involved, in effect the few people in power who made the final decision to go to war. It analysed a number of reasons to explain why these countries entered the war, such as Imperialism, Militarism, the effect of the media, and even mass hysteria. It also offered the alarming hypothesis that war was to some extent an attempt by elites to quell mounting civil unrest at home, in a number of countries including Britain, Germany and France. High levels of unemployment, deprivation, hunger, homelessness and the consequent threat of civil unrest was rife in Europe at the time, as was the growth of trade unionism and Marxism. The theory goes that potential for mass revolt within each nation had to be countered, so the elites chose international war, which in turn also pleased those firms who manufactured the means of war, and who made fortunes from it. Would our leaders stoop so low? The background we now know of to the invasion of Iraq suggests the answer to be yes.

A key conclusion from all conflicts is that as well as wasted lives, wars cost nations a great deal of money to wage and wars also leave the countries involved in a far worse condition afterwards. The UK did not finish re-paying the USA for support received

during WWII until quite recently – half a century after the event.

Whatever the reasons for WWI and many other subsequent conflicts, millions perish as a result, and many other lives are destroyed, all because of the decisions of a small elite group of people in each country.

The recent Iraq Inquiry has given us an emerging picture of the UK's highly questionable involvement in Iraq up to 2009. It is evident from this that decisions were made on the basis of flawed information and that the ultimate decision for war was itself of a dubious nature. And, like most conflicts of recent decades, the majority of casualties have been civilians; between 600,000 and one million Iraqi deaths in total, compared with under 5,000 total coalition military deaths. In other words, for every single coalition military death, there have been at least 133 civilian deaths. We see a similar picture in Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

We really need to be far more questioning when our leaders seek to take us to war, as they so regularly do. Let us consider for a moment the history of British Military Conflicts since 1945 and the countless Men and Women who have served in 'Forgotten' conflicts:

India, Palestine, Malaya, Korea, Suez Canal Zone, Kenya, Cyprus, Suez 1956, Borneo, Vietnam, Aden, Radfan, Oman, Dhofar, Northern Ireland, the Falklands War, the Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Iraq and many more.

Most people have heard of Britain's involvement in military conflicts in the latter half of last century, such as the Falklands War and the Gulf War, followed by Afghanistan and Iraq. What many do not realize is that soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women from Britain and the Commonwealth have been fighting small wars ostensibly to defend Britain's shrinking empire ever since the end of World War Two.

From the insect ridden jungles of Malaya to the frozen hills of Korea, in the back streets of Aden and Cyprus, from the African bush of Kenya to

the rain soaked hills of the Falkland Islands, young British soldiers have been waging war supposedly on our behalf and at the behest of successive Westminster political leaders for the last half a century and more. Britain's exports nowadays may be limited, but we most certainly continue to export and wage war. The British media offers little in the way of candid analysis, inevitably taking press releases at face value.

In the book of Isaiah it is said: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; for to us a Son is given, the Prince of Peace.' We are entrusted with a mission. Our mission is not simply to save a few souls from the wreckage of this world, since God so loved the world and has promised to redeem it. We are called to discover practical ways in today's and tomorrow's world of seeking justice without violence, and of making and maintaining peace without tyranny.

Even when the world sneers and says it can't be done, we are called to follow the Prince of Peace and become a peacemaker. In James 3 (v 17) we are told that: "those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of goodness".

We need to ask ourselves where the continuing Westminster military strategy of building weapons of war like aircraft carriers and Trident nuclear submarines fits into our vision of a peaceful world? Or the propensity for our leaders to take our people to fight ever more dubious wars in future? Or the willingness of our Westminster politicians to support British arms suppliers selling their wares to a myriad of other dubious nations. Where, if anywhere, do these decisions fit with THE PEACE OF JESUS.

Leo Tolstoy's novel, "War and Peace." serves as a reminder that the simple human attributes of goodness and truth can overcome great power. Tolstoy teaches us that an individual is not swept along on a tide of inevitability, but can influence even the greatest human events.

This has been proven by the lives of many heroes, such as Desmond Tutu, Aung San Suu Kyi, Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa. All of these and others have

proven that even without government power - and often in opposition to it - individuals can enhance human rights and wage peace, actively and effectively. It seems no coincidence that these heroes are or were people of strong religious faith. But such leaders and martyrs for change invariably need the masses to support them, as we see just now in Tunisia and elsewhere.

Peace (for those who are ill or suffering)

In this confused world, some **people** have **peace** while others go to pieces ! On a church sign it read: "No **God**, no **peace**; Know **God**, know **peace**."

I want to tell you a short story about the Rev. Kenny Macdonald and his wife Reta who live in Golspie, Sutherland. Almost 30 years ago, their daughter Alison, then aged just 19, vanished while on holiday in the Himalayas. He and his family have visited the area many times since the disappearance and have travelled the world following possible leads. The Rev Macdonald said: "It's something that gives us tremendous peace, that we can do everything we want to do. We've been 17 times out to the Himalayas, and went to Germany, to Wales and to Italy, following leads (in the hope of finding his daughter), and when you can do all you can, it gives you a tremendous peace in your heart." A record, called 'Keep Hope Alive', has been written and recorded by Lewis musician Calum Martin to re-awaken interest in Miss Macdonald's plight and to try to unearth information about her.

"We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," St. Paul proclaims (Romans 5.1).

Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. She had left her teaching post at a Roman Catholic girls' school in Calcutta in order to devote her life to working among the poorest of the poor in the slums of that city.

In making the award the Norwegian Nobel Committee expressed its recognition of Mother Teresa's work in bringing help to suffering humanity. A feature of her work has been respect for the individual

human being, for his or her dignity and innate value. The loneliest, the most wretched and the dying have, at her hands, received compassion without condescension.

This is not the first time the Norwegian Nobel Committee has awarded the Peace Prize for work undertaken in the struggle to overcome poverty and distress in the world, which also constitute a threat to peace. It has awarded the Peace Prize to champions of human rights, including those who have fought for racial equality.

peace.

it does not mean to be in a place
where there is no noise, trouble
or hard work. it means to be in
the midst of those things and still
be calm in your heart.

(unknown)

The imprisoned Chinese writer and human-rights campaigner, Liu Xiaobo just recently received the Nobel Peace Prize. He is currently in jail for expressing views which the Chinese government don't especially like. One of these is the claim that China has given up its morals in pursuit of material wealth, at any price.

In Matthew 14, just after Jesus had walked on the water, people brought their sick to Him and begged Him to let the sick touch the edge of His cloak and all who touched Him were healed. In Luke 6, people tried to touch Him because power was coming from Him and healing them.

In Leviticus 15, Jesus said, "Someone touched Me, because I know power has gone out from me." The ill woman who had touched Jesus then told Him the story of her miserable life, her feeling of despair and the burden of being an outcast. She took a huge risk and told it in the

presence of all those people in the crowd: How her illness had stopped and that she had been healed.

He placed His hand on her shoulder and then He called her "Daughter," the only woman so addressed by Jesus, and said "Your faith has healed You, go in peace." By faith she had been healed, not only from her physical condition, but also spiritually, and she was warmly welcomed by the Saviour into His family of believers, with the parting blessing, "Go in peace."

Jesus says to us personally, "Daughter, Son,... your faith has healed you, and saved you, Go in peace."

Peace (for those whose burden is great)

The only real peace we can have is peace with God which comes through faith in His Son Jesus.

Take My yoke upon you," Jesus said. Christ teaches us that we are called to service as long as life shall last. We are to take upon us His yoke, that we may be co-workers with Him.

But why does Jesus use the image of the yoke? At least two oxen are hitched together by a 'yoke' (i.e. the yoke is the device that links them) side by side. Oxen are called "beasts of burden." So why does He call his yoke easy, His burden light?

This is because He humbly yokes himself to us. Simon helped carry His cross; He helps carry ours. And He bears most of the weight if we let Him. That's why His yoke is easy. And He gives us His Spirit within (Romans 8:9-10) to give us the inner strength to bear our share of the burden, which is, of course, the far lesser share to begin with.

There are many whose hearts ache under a load of care because they seek to reach the world's standard. They have chosen its service, accepted its perplexities, adopted its customs, and strive to secure its rewards. The end result is their character is marred, and their life is

made weary. Their continual worry is wearing out their life forces.

Our Lord desires us to lay aside this yoke of bondage to worldly ideals. He invites us to accept His yoke; He says, "My yoke is easy, and My burden is light." He bids us seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and His promise is that all things needful to them for this life shall be added.

Worry is blind, and cannot discern the future; but Jesus sees the end from the beginning. In every difficulty He has His way prepared to bring relief. Our heavenly Father has a thousand ways to provide for us, of which we know nothing. Those who accept the one principle of making the service and honor of God supreme will find perplexities vanish, and a plain path before their feet.



In the heart of Christ, there was perfect peace. He was never elated by applause, nor dejected by censure or disappointment. Amid the greatest opposition and the most cruel treatment, He was still of good courage. But many who profess to be His followers have an anxious, troubled heart, because they are afraid to trust themselves with God. Often we do not make a complete surrender to Him; for we shrink from the consequences that such a surrender may involve. But unless we do make this surrender, we cannot find true peace.

The yoke is placed upon the oxen to aid them in drawing the load, to lighten the burden. So it is with the yoke of Christ. When our will is swallowed up in the will of God, and we use His gifts to bless others, we will find life's burden light. He who walks in the way of God's

commandments is walking in company with Christ, and in His love the heart is at rest.

Those who take Christ at His word, and surrender their souls to His keeping, their lives to His ordering, will find peace. From Hebrews 13(20-21) - God desires that each Christian experiences a calm, a tranquil, a peace within their hearts and not a panic or strife. The type of peace mentioned in this verse is divine in origin: we are not talking about a general peace, but about a specific peace: the peace “of GOD!”

God’s peace is both inward and outward. It is both a matter of how we are within ourselves as well as how we relate to others. The peace of God is both horizontal and vertical. It concerns our relationships on earth and above all how we relate to God.



Wherever you find peace mentioned in the Bible it refers either to: The reconciliation of a Christian to God in salvation; or, to the mental mind-set that should be found in the believer. The New Testament teaches that “we have peace WITH God”; and, as a result we can experience “the peace OF God”.

The only way to bring harmony and healing into any situation is to fix our eyes on God who has given us peace with himself through Jesus! And that ought to lead to us experiencing peace with other people. We might look at this as a kind of 'Domino effect' – God accepts us with our faults & failings – and so in turn should we accept others, with all their faults and failings!

When the Christian church proclaims that Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, it is not simply an affirmation of faith, but also a clear call to action. As faithful followers of the Prince of Peace, the church collectively, and all Christians individually, are called to be "shalom-makers" (shalom here means the harmonious wholeness and unity of a community).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Mt 5.9). Shalom is not only a gift of grace restored for us through Jesus Christ, but also a task and responsibility entrusted to all who are called "children of God". Peacemakers are not simply peaceable and peaceful persons; they are those who actively and earnestly endeavour to "make" peace, shalom, here and now. The church and Christians are called to be signs and instruments of shalom and peace in this world.