**23rd December 2018**

**Luke 2.8-20**

Having three children means I have served my time attending numerous nativity plays in various settings: church, school, playgroups. I remember one performance where a motley band of shepherds, complete with proscribed tea towels on their heads were supposed to be sitting quietly awaiting the presence of the angel Gabriel. Except that the director of the play had only got one toy lamb for them to hold. Children being children, a scuffle broke out over who should hold the lamb. It’s mine, no it’s mine. It was more than apposite when the angel arrived announcing peace on earth.

This advent we have been following the theme of being a peacemaker. The prophet Isaiah foretold that Jesus would be the Prince of Peace. The angels sang of good news and peace on earth. Yet in the gospels Jesus says contradictory things. That he offers a peace that the world cannot give (John 14.27). But that he has also come not to bring peace but a sword that will divide people, even families (Matthew 10.38).

In the ten minutes I have with you as the warm up act for our Nativity play, I briefly want to give reasons why Jesus is the Prince of Peace and reasons why he brings division and conflict.

First of all, he brings us peace with God. The old King James Version of the Bible has the angels saying, *‘On earth peace, goodwill toward men’.*

Our NIV version says ‘*and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests’*

The older version seems to imply that everyone in the world would have peace through Christ. The newer seems to be saying that only God’s special favourites will have peace through him.

Neither of these interpretations is the most accurate.

To get the best understanding of this famous announcement we should remind ourselves what ‘peace’ usually means in the Bible. It is not a general peacefulness, with prosperity and a trouble-free life. ‘Peace’ means the end of enmity and warfare. The Bible says the most fundamental and important peace is peace with God.

The natural human heart wants to be king, wants to be Lord of our own lives, and so is hostile to God’s claims of lordship over us. Until we see our instinctive hostility to God’s authority, we can’t understand one of the great, deep mainsprings of all human behaviour.

We are committed to the idea that the only way we will be happy is if we are wholly in charge of our lives. Of course, this leads us into self-centredness and conflict with other human beings. No, I want the lamb, it’s mine! So, hostilities with God lead to hostilities with others. There is no peace on earth because there is no peace with God.

The proclamation of Christmas however is ‘God and sinners reconciled’ as we will sing later in Hark the herald angels sing. Jesus is the perfect mediator between estranged parties. by assuming human nature, the God -man bridges the chasm. By showing his commitment and loving service, his death on the cross forgiving us our sins – holding out the chance of redemption and new life through the power of his Spirit at work in our hearts – we can know peace. The God who wants to be the sovereign over us is not a tyrant, nor a bully, but is love. God shows that love through Jesus, in vulnerability, born in a manger, suffered and died, but loves and forgives to the end. That is the offer of peace in Christ for those who accept.

When you lay down the hostility and stop the rebellion the peace you experience changes you.

You acknowledge your true identity – you are a loved child of God.

It changes your security – you don’t have to fear what others say about you or how you perform – because you know – all is grace – God does not judge us on how good we are – a mistake most people make about religion. Religion is technically about good deeds done to keep in favour with god or the gods. Christianity is not a religion in that sense – because it says there is nothing you can do to be good. You can try – but you will always be worried that you haven’t made the grade. You will know your inadequacies and failings and hypocrisies.

That is why God sent us a saviour, Jesus means ‘God saves us. We just need the light to go on up here (the mind) and in here (the heart) to know we are unconditionally loved by God – which is called grace. All that should lead to a deep peace because you know who you, you know you are loved.

We fear rejection and failure, but you don’t need to fear what others may say or do to you because you are completely filled with God’s love. You may fear the future and circumstances, but if you know God perfectly, and that He is good and in control, you would trust him. And you wouldn’t be afraid of death – because you are held by God and know you would be with him forever.

That’s why angels always start by saying ‘don’t be afraid’. They are messengers of a God who is love, a God is ultimately in control and who doesn’t want people to live in fear – but to know the peace of a relationship with Him.

Does that mean then that Christmas brings only peace for Christian believers? No, In the sermon on the mount Jesus tells us that all his disciples, those who follow his Way, can be peacemakers. Peacemakers are people who through making peace with God, have finally learnt how to admit flaws and weakness, how to surrender pride, how to love without the need to control every situation. These new skills have enormous power to defuse conflicts, to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation between people.

Christians should be fanning out into the world being peacemakers, agents of reconciliation among the races and classes, among the members of families and between neighbour and neighbour. Christmas means that through the grace of God and the incarnation, peace with God is available; and if you make peace with God, then you can go too and make peace with everybody else. And the more people who embrace the gospel and do that, the better off the world is. Christmas therefore means the increase of peace – both with God and between people – across the face of the world.

However, there is a reaction.

At Jesus circumcison when he was eight days old the old priest Simeon predicted

‘*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,****35****so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.’* Luke 2 33-35

Jesus would say

***34****‘Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.****35****For I have come to turn*

*‘“a man against his father,  
    a daughter against her mother*,

Matthew 10.34

Of course, he does not mean that Jesus comes to incite violence. He means rather that his call to allegiance and to walk his way, will bring conflict – conflicts both among people and within people. Just like any peacemaker who has ever lived, (think Martin Luther king, Ghandi, Mandela) Jesus makes people mad, and he often causes struggle and strife. Yet this is the way his peace comes.

Like last week when we looked at living honest, compassionate lives with integrity – practicing lives of peace and justice – you will get push back.

I remember reading about a policeman who after converting to Christianity, would not take the money that the local pimps quietly passed around his precinct so that the police would not arrest their prostitutes. A couple of the other policemen approached him and said, ‘you’d better watch it. You are making the other guys very nervous. You have to take the money.’ He refused, and after getting some anonymous threats, he had to move to another city.

The manger at Christmas means that, if you live like Jesus, there won’t be room for you in a lot of inns.

In the early days of Christianity Roman society was virtually awash with gods, religious cults and mystery religions. In that culture it was expected that you should have your own private faith and your own gods. But when it came time to give public honor to the gods of the city of the divine emperor himself, you had to participate and conform to societies expectations and values. To refuse aroused suspicion resentment and anger especially because they feared divine reprisals.

It quickly became clear that Christianity was different from those other religions. The exclusiveness of Christian belief and their conviction that Jesus was not just a god but THE God and Saviour – put it on a collision course with nearly everyone in that pluralistic society. We are still a threat to the social order and still seen as intolerant. Sometimes we bring it on ourselves, by hypocrisy and bigotry and people have a right to be offended by us. But Simeon is saying that there is an offensiveness to Jesus himself and it will bring conflict.

It will also bring internal conflict – as we struggle spiritually to change from old ways of living to new ways of living as guided by the Spirit of Jesus. The old self continues to want you to be your own master, but the new self knows the peace of letting God be God. When the two wills cross, of course there will be a fight. However, when you get through those conflicts with God and finally say ‘not my will be done but yours’ we go deeper into his peace.

Let’s hope our shepherds don’t fight in the nativity play. May you know the peace of Christ this Christmas. But may you know that that peace may be costly. But as the angels encourage us: may you not be afraid. May you know the joy of the good news that a Saviour has been born for you.

Bibliography: T. Keller The Hidden Christmas, Hodder, 2016