

Prince of Peace

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Isaiah 9⁶⁻⁷ / Acts 4

The Mission of the Twelve

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. ¹¹Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. ¹²As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (Matt 10)

I am not naturally a peaceful person. I am a fighter; an arguer, a grizzler! But I discovered as a young person and especially at school that in most cases this doesn't pay. On one occasion whilst sitting in a year 10 maths class we were having to endure

a lesson which wasn't going well – for everyone. The class was restless and noisy. We had been told to be quiet on numerous occasions but it just wasn't happening. Finally the teacher warned us that if the incessant chatter didn't finish he would hold the whole class back after school. A few continued but really the noise wasn't that bad. It was clear to me that the teacher was bringing a lot of this on himself. Gradually the noise arose as people consulted one another about the lesson. All at once the teacher's patience broke and he yelled out 'Stand up all those who are talking!!' Thinking that most of the class would be honest and stand up and he would then have to deal with a whole group of people I stood up. To my shock no one else did. I awaited the congratulations for being honest. They didn't come. I was summarily sent to be canned and it wasn't nice. It was also incredibly unfair but it did save the rest of the class a detention for which I was left completely uncelebrated!

I've left that all behind now. I've forgiven that group of people a long time ago but I struggle to leave behind my propensity to resist. How do you cope with bullies or with the patently unfair or with simply missing out? Are you a fighter?

One of the unusual things about Jesus is that His title calls us to another way – the way of peace. It is almost always the more difficult way. It is almost always the more protracted way. It is almost always the way that requires more from us. And yet, it is Christ's way and it is so because it is God's way.

If there is one word which should describe the nature of our community and, indeed, what people see in us as Christians it is likely to be this word. From the beginning peace or '*shalom*' as it is in the Hebrew, described something much more than a state of non-war or non-aggression. Peace is not the absence of conflict but the state of total well-being, prosperity, and security associated with God's presence. Where God truly is there is peace. As God's people on earth we are meant to be bearers of that peace. Indeed, that is, our first and foremost gift to the world according to our passage in Matt 10 today;

¹²As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. (Matt 10)

We probably don't look at this passage enough but it seems pretty clear to me. Jesus is saying that this peace we offer is, in fact, the prime gift of the body of Christ. We are, as it were, primarily 'Peace Givers' and our whole aim and goal in all the places we go should be to offer and create the conditions necessary for peace. Now I am not saying that this will always be possible and I am certainly not suggesting that in cases of outright abuse or violence we should or can simply accept what is being dished out but we need to take Jesus' example seriously in this regard. He did not shout or cry out but He received the death penalty for our sakes to bring peace not just to us but to the whole world.

And what is the nature of this peace? What does it look like? Two characteristics come easily to mind. The first is that this peace is clearly a peace with God and the second is justice – there is no peace on earth without justice.

We are they who know God's love and grace – we live in the light of God's Presence – and as a result of that we know a special joy because of our reconciliation with God. Joy then is a direct result of peace with God and it should characterise the community of Christ. We need to ask ourselves - are we joyful? Do we appear joyful? Do we inspire joy? Do we know joy somewhere deep inside?

There is much to be said here but let me make one comment on what I see as a major impediment to joy in our culture. Coming, as many of us do, from a rather doer, Scots or one might even add if looking more broadly at this a Germanic strain we are, in large part, a very **earnest** people. We like to take things seriously; we like to do a good job; we like to see ourselves as competent and be seen as competent. Now, in many things this is a good trait but it is also a joy killer. When we reject or criticise or look down upon others because they haven't been as competent as we might like then we do two things. We cloud God's default joy with each one of us and we end up being hard on ourselves.

God's joy is a default setting. God is pleased with each of us. He loves each of us. He is a greatest advocate and He is the One

who sees us as we truly are and continues to love us. Our competence or otherwise is of no importance in determining that basic attitude. Simply put if God is for us, who can be against us! Now this doesn't mean that God approves of everything we do but it does mean that God takes joy at and in us and, as with our own children and grandchildren, even when we've made a mistake – his love is constant. The question is – are we able to be like that with each other and with those around us. Or, as I so often find the case is with me – do we leap to criticism and rejection whenever we spot a mistake.

I used to have a piano teacher like this. She would spot a mistake from a hundred paces literally. I remember her once telling me to practice a piece while she went and did something in her kitchen which was down below on the ground floor of her house. When she was literally at the other end of the house I made a little mistake she cried out in despair and came bounding up the stairs to tell me how bad that sounded. **And it was only a little mistake!** Now I knew I had made the mistake. What I didn't know was whether I was any good! Where I'd done something... anything! – right!

Do you know people in your life like that? People who spot every mistake? Friends, we don't want to be like that this year. We want to be a gracious and loving community who bring peace to those we're with. What an amazing reputation to have – these people ring peace. This person is great to have around

because he/she calms everybody down. Let's be this kind of person this year!

The second characteristic of God's peace is justice. Where there is justice there is peace. Justice brings peace; justice creates peace.

The new community in Acts became first and foremost a community of justice – caring in an absolutely sacrificial way for the people who couldn't care for themselves so that the community actually shaped itself around this imperative. It said to itself – this is what God would do – how can we do it? And then it is decided – we just can't leave widows and orphans to fend for themselves. We know what happens to them. The widows end up being fodder for unscrupulous men who simply want to use them to satisfy their own needs and the orphans become hard and angry people with terrible scars on the inside which they must deal with for the rest of their lives. What shall we do, asked this first community? **We** shall feed them. We shall support them. We shall love them.

What is it that God is calling us to in the New Year? What is it that we could create or do that would deliver? It seems to me that we need to think carefully about this because we need, if God's joy and peace is to be present amongst us, to give ourselves to this task – to building a little bit of God's new Jerusalem amongst us.

Could it be a business of some sort to help the unemployed? Could it be a new service for solo mums and dads? Could it be a club for young people to help them mature and grow to be more balanced adults? Whatever it is we need to move in this direction.

Perhaps the most effective way to bring the peace of Christ is to give ourselves to promoting a little bit of Justice and Joy this New Year and especially for the young. If we can prevent the young people of our city from forming the kind of scars which turn them into angry people we will deliver a more peaceful society for many years to come.