

PEACE IS MANY STEPS

(Galatians 5:16-25), Matthew 5:1-12, 43-48

From the sermon on 15 November 2015

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Last week was Remembrance Sunday and I guess my sermon from then is summed up by these words:

To remember is to work for peace

After last week's service a couple of folk made similar comments to me. What does it mean to be peacemakers? If Jesus calls us to work for peace, how do we actually do that? The early church was known for its commitment to peace. After all, Jesus himself is called the Prince of Peace. At each service they shared a sign of peace, a practice that continues to this day in many churches.

Jim Wallis is the leader of the Sojourners Christian Community in the USA. (He happens to be married to an English clergywoman called Joy Carroll who was the real life inspiration for the comedy sitcom *The Vicar of Dibley*!) Anyway, Jim has written a book with a great title – *Waging Peace*. In the very first page he explains his thinking. He describes a demonstration he was attending at a military base:

A rain began to fall that continued through the night. We were all soaked through our clothing when a quick mountain weather change caused the temperature to plummet and the rain to turn to sleet. I couldn't remember when I had been so cold.

Throughout that wet and bitterly cold night I thought about what it means to 'wage peace'.

I first pictured centuries of soldiers sitting in rain and cold as we were that night. People have always been ready to leave their families, go to faraway places, endure incredible hardships, and even die in order to wage a war.

Is it conceivable, I wondered, that the cost of peace could be less? What if we were willing to sacrifice for peace as others have sacrificed for war?

It is time to wage peace.

Jim Wallis: Waging Peace

So what is peace-making all about? Is it just about wars and guns and bombs? I'd like to take a look at peace from various angles – from big scale to small scale – and to suggest that peace is a much bigger subject than you might imagine. Sure we can start with guns and bombs but I want to go beyond that.

If you want peace, work for justice

We live in a world where war continues to be a feature; though there may be no fighting in the streets of Britain the UK still wages war in other places around the world. We live in a country with a huge reliance on weapons and the arms trade and not just for our own defence. One of the biggest ways our country chooses to make money is actually by designing and building weapons which we sell to other countries.

We can get involved in working for peace at this level. Many Christians are part of CAAT (the Campaign Against the Arms Trade). Our own church regularly visits Faslane so that people can express how they feel about nuclear weapons. For the adventurous, there are groups like Witness For Peace and Christian Peacemaker teams who go to some of the most dangerous places on earth to support people caught up in conflict and persecution. And, of course, while the Prime Minister will not phone us up to ask permission before starting a new war, we are able (every one of us) to use our vote to help select politicians who care about peace.

All of this is big-scale stuff. There are also big-scale related issues. It's well said that *Only Justice Brings Peace*. Langside Church has a banner which includes these very words. Peace isn't just an absence of fighting. Real lasting peace comes about when things are made fair. So whenever we work for justice, we are working for peace. This church has its own Justice and Peace group; anyone of us can get involved. That's working for peace. So is buying and supporting Fair Trade. So is supporting charities, like Christian Aid, which help the poorest people in our world. We have been invited to take part in a march in two weeks' time in Edinburgh, highlighting the fact that climate change is set to destabilise our world. Taking action on climate change is another way to work for peace as the poorest nations stand to lose the most. If we want peace we must make the world a fairer place.

Kate Pickett wrote a book, called *Spirit Level*, in which she asserts that the gap between richest and poorest in a society is crucial. She quotes many statistics to justify her claims that where the gap is wider, the whole of society suffers. Where it is smaller, the country is more stable and content. The good news for us in the UK is that we are one of the wealthiest countries on earth. The bad news is that we are one of the most unequal, and things are getting worse. So when we support moves to lessen the gap between the richest and the poorest, we are working for peace. When we support the poor in our own land, we are working for peace. When we give to, or help at, Foodbanks, we are working for peace.

So there are lots of big-scale things we can be involved in and concerned about that aren't directly about war or guns or fighting but do have to do with making peace on earth.

Peace at home

Let's move away from big-scale issues a bit closer to home. We can work for peace in local situations. Conflicts can begin almost anywhere and in very immediate circumstances; conflicts mean an absence of peace. We experience this at home in our closest relationships, amongst our families, with our colleagues and sometimes even with our oldest friends.

The easiest thing to do in a conflict situation is to lash out and seek revenge. The better thing to do is the much harder thing to do and it will probably take much longer to do too! That is to attempt to heal the wounds and sort out the issues. It might be quicker just go into a huff, develop resentments, nurse rage or grievances; but that's not good for the others involved and it isn't actually good for us either. We become bitter, twisted, obsessed and stuck.

Learning to forgive, to find a way forward, to heal, takes time and effort but it is worth that effort. This is what brings peace. Trouble can happen in churches too – between factions, or ministers who bully or are bullied, or between groups and individuals who fall out. It can take a lot to put things right. The Church of Scotland (now in association with other churches) has created a group called *A Place For Hope*. These are people who come into a situation from outside to attempt to resolve arguments and disputes and find a way forward. It can be a lot of work – it doesn't always work but it's a better way forward. It is working for peace.

Pray for peace

Of course something we can all do is to pray for peace. We can pray for peace at all levels, from international to local. In our reading today, Jesus says, *You have heard it was said 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.'* But now I tell you: *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you will be children of your Father in heaven.*

Matthew 5: 43-45a

These are very memorable words. We tend to focus on the phrase, *Love your enemies*. It's a surprising and radical command. But check out the next words, *Pray for those who persecute you*. Pray for your enemies? That's pretty astounding. But Jesus isn't daft. He knows what he is saying. He's suggesting that you think of someone you can't stand, someone who has wronged you, someone you have had a disagreement with and then you pray for that person. It may be a difficult thing to do at first, but once you do that, something changes. You can't continue to despise or to hate someone you are praying for. Even if that person doesn't change, *you* will change; your attitude changes and peace starts to do its work in you.

Peace is an inside job

Praying for our enemies is something we can all do. Praying for peace is something we can all do. But there is one more area we need to visit and it is the closest of all. It might be the hardest challenge for us all, too. Peace has to be in us. Peace has to be on the inside. If we are to work for peace effectively, we ourselves need to have a peaceful heart. These days our lives are often not filled with peace. We have lives filled with busyness, with conflict with anger, with resentment.

I once witnessed a fight in the Scottish CND office!! Admittedly It was during a very frantic and stressful week. The G8 summit was meeting at Gleneagles, there were some international peace groups coming to Faslane and the Make Poverty History march was happening in Edinburgh all in the one week! The office was inundated with calls for information and people looking for accommodation.

Now in this fight nobody was stabbed or killed and no punches were thrown. But it was a real fight nonetheless between the two men who were employed there in front of a bunch of others who were visiting or helping in the office. Even for these two men committed to working for peace, there was a lack of peace within themselves which erupted that day. I tell the story not to condemn them so much as to point out that peace can be lacking in all sorts of situations.

Real peace is something positive. It's not just the absence of fighting. The Hebrew word *Shalom* is a big, important word. It doesn't just mean no-one is getting shot today. Shalom means everything is right – as it should be. Shalom means wellbeing. At the heart of the world's great religions is peace; those followers of faith who take their tradition most seriously become peaceful people. This has been true down the centuries: St Francis... Gandhi... Martin Luther King... Dalai Lama...

We might think that there are plenty of people we know in church who aren't peaceful people at all. That's because lots of people play at faith. We say we are Christians, that we believe and we go to a church but we don't really practise our faith. We don't ask God to help mould us into better people.

In the 20th century, Mother Theresa said, *We do not need guns and bombs to bring peace. We need love and compassion.* In the 14th century, a Dutch clergyman called Thomas A Kempis said, *First keep peace with yourself, then you can also bring peace to others.* In the 1st century, the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that *peace* is one of the fruits of the spirit. (Galatians 5: 22)

How do you develop this fruit? It comes about by our attending to our inner life. It comes about by sticking close to God in prayer, meditation and thinking. Spending time in prayer and meditation is a good path to becoming more peaceful – more in tune with God and with what matters. Here's how a Buddhist monk called Thich Nhat Hanh describes inner peace:

Our true home is in the present moment. To live in the present moment is a miracle. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment. Peace is all around us – in the world and in nature – and within us – in our bodies and our spirits. Once we learn to touch this peace, we will be healed and transformed. It is a matter of practice.

We need only to find ways to bring our body and mind back to the present moment so we can touch what is refreshing, healing, and wondrous.

Thich Nhat Hanh: From *Touching Peace*

Thich Nhat Hanh is saying a very significant thing here. He is saying that the peace we seek is already there. We don't get peace to come into our lives any more than we get God to come to our lives even though we might express ourselves in such words. Deep within us, God is there already. Deep within us, peace is there already. Our task is to find ways to discover that so that we can experience it for ourselves.

So being concerned about peace is not some little niche concern or a small aspect of faith. It's a huge thing that affects our world, our neighbourhood and our own personal lives. If we are serious about following Jesus, we need to be serious about pursuing peace – at the big level, at the local level, and, first of all, within ourselves.

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