

St George's Church

Zoom

10 April 2022

## **BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS (Readings Psalm 7:14-16, Matthew 5:9, Mark 11: 15-17)**

### **Introduction**

Well some sermons almost write themselves. And some are a real wrestle as you sense you are on to something but are not quite there yet. This is one of those sermons as I have wrestled with how do I as a Christian practice peacemaking in the context of Ukraine, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Mali. And closer to home, how do I practice peacemaking in my marriage, within my family, my work and even my church?

So today I bring you some thoughts rather than conclusions in the hope that you might add to the korero/conversation, and we might collectively sense what it means to be peacemakers in our own contexts, but also collectively – what does a peacemaking St George's look like?

So here are my tentative conclusions, which I hope you will add to:

### **The World at War**

Make no mistake the world is at war. Don't misread the Ukrainian conflict as a conflict between two European powers. It is a proxy war. While the western alliance may not have committed troops, they have committed intelligence, the latest in high tech armaments and the strongest of economic sanctions to support Ukraine. While on the other side Russia is calling in favours from Syria and elsewhere. The stakes are so high, this is a war that neither side

can afford to lose, so the previously unthinkable, the threat of chemical warfare and a nuclear strike has to be taken seriously.

But even this war pales into insignificance compared to the battle between the principalities and powers and the Prince of Peace that played out in and around Jerusalem 2000 years ago and climax in holy week. For this battle was not just for physical territory, the stakes were much higher – at stake was the cosmos and the future of humanity. It goes right down to the wire in a mismatched fight between a local carpenter, with rather good parentage and the religious, military and political might of the Jewish religious establishment and the Roman authorities. Will hope prevail, or will we be forever doomed to a Narnian like eternal winter of despair?

And then there is the enigma of Jesus himself. On the one hand he chooses to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and not a war horse. He continues to minister to the needy, even though he knows he is putting himself in great peril. On the night of his betrayal, as the heavily armed soldiers come to arrest him, he tells Peter to put away his sword and even goes as far as to heal the injured servant. It seems that Jesus is renouncing violence as a means of ushering in his kingdom.

Yet shortly after the swaying palms have been lain down and the crowds dispersed, he unleashes an unprecedented and seemingly unprovoked act of violence storming the temple, overturning tables and eviscerating the stall holders – “how dare you turn my father house into a den of robbers”.

And yet again, a few hours later he will stand silent before his accusers who are intent on robbing the Father of his only begotten Son and his mother of her oldest child.

**So how do I reconcile the table turning, indescribably angry Jesus with the donkey riding, turn the other cheek, put away your sword**

**Jesus? How do I reconcile the Jesus whose verbal violence extends to calling the religious elite a brood of vipers with the Jesus who so even notices the touch of a woman on his cloak?**

**And how does the Prince of Peace actions shaped my understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2022.**

**Point One: Peacemaking is not the absence of conflict.**

Peacemaking is better described as shalom making. It is the restoration of right relationships – ourselves, others, God. Ironically it will often lead to an escalation in conflict as we seek to remove the social, cultural and religious barriers that work against right relationships. Inevitably any challenge to social, cultural and religious barriers will excite a response? Why because traditional power balances are being challenged. And disrupted power always fights back. So while leaders such as Martin Luther King espouse peaceful protest, he was himself in near continuous conflict with political and religious leaders' intent on preserving the status quo. Much closer to home we know that in our personal lives, conflict avoidance is seldom the secret to a happy marriage.

The reason Jesus reacted so angrily to the cartels who inserted themselves between God and humanity was because they had made a highly profitable industry out of selling birds and animals for sacrifice and from requiring everyone to change their local currency into a special temple currency. How dare you turn my father's house into a den of thieves. Jesus consistently directed his strongest critique not towards the sinners nor morally dubious, but towards those who put barriers between God and his people.

**Point 2 Evil is real, and it is playing out on our screens every night as we see in Ukraine.**

Jesus' death and resurrection smashed once and for all the principalities and powers, but it did not mean 'they left the building

completely'. Evil is still very present and takes many forms – from political and religious despots to economic systems that preferentially favour the wealthy and powerful over the poor and vulnerable. I think we are naive when it comes to understanding evil. We have the means to insulate ourselves from its effects and we become desensitised to its effects, until we see it close up on our screens.

Richard Niehbur, Christian ethicist and theologian who lived through the experiences of World War 2 and his most famous book in '*Christ and Culture*' writes:

***'Christian pacifists have an overdeveloped confidence in human goodness; they believe the gospel law of love is enough to rid the world of violence and evil. Such an approach is not only naïve but heretical.'***

The heresy lies in our overinflated notion of humanity's inherent goodness and naïve in the face of overwhelming evidence of evil. I am very challenged by these thoughts. Part of my spiritual practice is to pray the psalms. Temperamentally I am drawn to the bucolic psalms that speak of still waters and green pastures and the psalms that marvel at vastness of God's creation and yet his tender care of me. Now I hold that all Scripture is inspired, so how then do I then pray Psalms such as Psalm 7:

*"Behold, the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and gives birth to lies. He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made. His mischief returns upon his own head, and on his own skull his violence descends".*

*ESV Psalm 7: 14- 16*

The greatest act of peace-making is to pray. Our very impotence in the face of overwhelming evil and despair drives us to our knees, not even knowing what to pray but that the Holy Spirit does, and Jesus

intercedes on our behalf. We pray that God will raise up peace makers on both sides of the conflict. But I think we can be even bolder in our prayers. The implicative psalms – implore God to bring down the wicked and the corrupt.

In praying for peace and regime change in Russia, deep down I know what I am really praying. It is for this reason that committed Christian's like Bonhoeffer did not adopt pacifism and instead actively participated in the campaign to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

**Point no.3 Peacemaking starts and is sustained in our relationship with God.** Peacemaking is more than a temperament or a posture. It is hard, challenging and in some contexts dangerous work. It requires great levels of resilience and also a deep sense of humility and trust in God. Ultimately it is relational. Shalom making with myself, with others and with God. So how can I be a peacebuilder when I am not myself in right relation with God? As we accept God's peace, we learn to make peace with ourselves and with others.

## **Conclusion**

Pilate well aware of the setup he was being invited to participate in, attempted to turn the tables on the Jesus plotters. I am sure he deeply resented being used by the religious authorities to do their dirty work, so instead he attempts to turn the tables on the religious leaders by referencing an age-old custom that every Passover it was the practice to release a prisoner. He offered the crowd a choice between **Jesus Barabbas – a prince of war or Jesus Christ – the prince of peace.** The crowd chose the prince of war as their saviour. I don't think it would be much different today. A sense of impotence, distrust of authority figures, manipulation by powerful elites together inspire tribalism where we are defined by what we are not, where life becomes a polarity between them and us. We are

seeing those elements in our own society, and it is incumbent on all of us to practice shalom making in the name of Christ.

Peace making starts close to home: homes, marriages, workplaces, even our churches

What a powerful witness to the world if Christians stepped away from the tribalism and modelled peaceful living.

And so a story to finish.

**Some years ago Josh told us the story of Vedron Smelovic – cellist of Sarajevo.**

So fellow peacemakers, what is the cello you already have at hand, that you could make your instrument of peace.

So that where there us hatred, you sow love

Injury, pardon

Doubt, faith

Despair, hope

Darkness, light

Sadness, joy

Blessed are the Peacemakers for they will be called children of God.