

Prayer: Lord of Peace, in a world of war, seen and unseen, in a time of trouble and trauma, we dare say; to imagine, and to confess: Yours is the kingdom, the peaceable kingdom. Help us to see your vision for us and our world and then do our best to make it real. Amen.

Christmas has started! Well most of the 'First World' thinks it has anyway – the rest of the world is too hungry, tired, diseased, busy surviving to care.... AS we walk into the celebration of Jesus birth this year we will be reflecting on the traditional themes of 'Peace, Hope, Love and Light' within the title "Listen – God is calling". Cv

'**Listen**-God is calling: Peace' and today both our Bible texts push us into a wide frame of what that 'peace' might look like. Isaiah gave a vision; Jesus gave lifestyle challenges and Martin Luther King Jnr gave us this: "Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice." God calls us to justice within the frame of his paths ways, his light, his kingdom as lived and taught by His Son – who's **second coming we wait for**.....

Scholar, W Brueggemann's challenge is: "As we observe the season of Advent and look long and hard at themes of pilgrimage and preparation, of waiting and watching, it is challenging to be made aware that what the Church currently awaits is not Christmas, but the **second coming** of Jesus. The Christ-child born in Bethlehem fulfils the promise of the Old Testament; but that same Christ-Child becomes a promise of something **much more** – the coming of the Son of Man at an **unknown hour**. Today, we no longer await the baby's birth. We await His return. Celebrating Christmas means renewing the promise and standing ready to welcome God's consummation." (from Cousar, Gaventa and Newsome, Texts for Preaching, Year A) my emphasis.

Once again as people of faith we are different to the world around us. Christmas is not so much about what *has been* but what will be – **Christ will come again**, so **be ready, Jesus warns us**. He says it is in the middle of our living that our being ready takes place. In the middle of all the conflicts and tensions, of learning's and livings we are to be his people. We are to walk in his ways and live our best in that mysterious way of faith that is both **now** and 'what **will be**'. CV

The Hebrew concept of 'peace' – in *Shalom* reflects the overabundant, extra-ordinarily generous God we believe in. Shalom/ **peace** means "fullness", having **all we need** to feel complete and healthy. It is in one sense far removed from a mere *absence of peace*. A life filled with shalom is a form of living that is about actively pursuing a positively balanced life and an integral component both Jesus and Isaiah tell us includes justice, **done God's way**.

The peaceable kingdom that we have presented to us as a Christmas theme is a just one. Peace – true Godly peace, shalom only happens/ breaks into our world when justice is observed. For Justice to be observed- 'someone' has to be trusted with 'enough' to make the call. Within our faith we declare the only 'one' who can do that – justly – is God, Creator, parent, with enough love to do what is best for each one of us – now and 'then'.

Our Matthew text this morning is all about the 'end' when justice must be, and it is anything but peaceful. Conflict and tension happen in at least two ways: 1. It describes the tensions and conflicts of daily life – within our 'home and within the global village we now live in. From the tension of hurricane Haiyan; to the prayer requests in our weekly church bulletin, our lives need shalom. We need the peace of Christ to stabilise us; to hold us on an even keel so that we can actively watch and wait **and be** the people Jesus has called as his hands and feet in the world.

We need the shalom of God to be different to those around who do not know, do not have *this gift* in their lives so that we can show in our words, by our actions – a better, healthier, balanced life style – and **be different** to the 'people of Noah's / our time' who are living like there is no tomorrow. Living

like there is no end-time, there will be no call to justice, no accounting of the use to which they have put the gifts given them by our creator God. Because there will be, God in the beginning and God at the ending that's how it is. We know this – Jesus says we must live it – daily.

And that leads me into the second point about tension I believe is being highlighted; this passage creates tension! When reading Matthew's Gospel, we can't avoid the fact that judgement is a major theme for him. He has a particular view point about how the ending of the world and our history will happen. He sees God at the beginning and the end and in that end there will be 'accountability and justice, a ground for hope; in the end, peace among the nations.'^(loader) But as with all scripture we must remember to seek balance and this passage has been in my opinion all too often, twisted beyond its word frame.

We do not know when the ending will be, millions of TV evangelists and their shows etc have speculated and promulgated and terrified people. There is a warning in this text not to take knowledge-control of the future so to predict what will happen. Jesus says **God alone** knows, our focus is not trying to guess – but **to live in shalom**. Live in peace, with justice as a foundation that we might be healthy and enable others to be healthy and complete too....

Matthew's text says first that the main thing to know about the future is **"God"**; and actually there are times / places / things which are out of our control, beyond our knowledge and we need to trust. Trust who? What? When? How????

Knowledge control theology is not about trusting a God who loves us enough and wants to bless our lives with shalom, knowing 'that' is enough. A God who loves us enough to call us to account for our actions, our contributions to society, our use of the gifts of love, intellect, managerial skills, teaching abilities, friendship capacity, hospitality, spiritual discernment, ... all the best things *about us* as people, given for us, **for each other** to make the peaceable kingdom that is Isaiah's dream of the 'then', present among us now. Cv

A God who loves us enough to send his only son and risk everything contained in that relationship to tell us so. **Jesus came** and promised he will come again – this promise and its renewal is what we celebrate each Christmas. In an interesting reflection John VDLaar draws a circle of thought from the promise of new life with God that is ours because of Christmas; to the judgement of God for us and our world. He says: "God's promise of new life is **intricately linked** to God's judgment on all that **threatens or counters that promise**, be it in our individual lives or within community or the world."

How we live matters. How we live out our 'different-ness' to a world living without shalom, without God's healthy balance, matters because in all fairness we will be asked why not. The hard challenge with scripture is that it is not there for intellectual satisfaction alone. Word and deed are inseparably tied by faith. If we do not live as a people who **believe in God's coming** to be with us – in Jesus, and live as Jesus told us to – **why not**? And do we really think we can challenge the justness of God's justice when calling us to account for how we live? It's not like God is unfair, corrupt, with a condemnatory judgemental attitude towards us *is it*? What does the face of your God look like? Cv

What happens to it at Christmas? When we remember that the face God showed the world *and us* was a vulnerable baby, not condemnation but love. Enough love to come to us, to be with us and give the promise to come again. Today we have had an opportunity to reflect on **Jesus's coming again**, and how in that process we will be asked how well we have listened to God's calling us into 'peace'.

Have we enough courage to live as a people who **believe** in Isaiah's vision of God's peaceable kingdom that we will practice its values and principles **now**? Have we the courage to commit ourselves to living with integrity, justice and peace and invite others into this way of life **because it is** better balanced, healthier and more complete way to live? "Listen God is calling: shalom". Amen