

Empathy, Relationships, & Peace.

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

In the week I was looking back over interesting bits I'd saved from people's posts on Facebook and doing a little tidy up. In doing this, I came across two articles that got me thinking about this week's Advent theme of peace. One was talking how a new type of computer [neural network shows us about how language influences thought](#). The other gave the neuroscientific explanation for how [people's words and actions can actually shape your brain](#). As an aside, if you're interested in either of these articles, both of which are written for people without expertise in the field, you can look up this sermon on our website and the links will be in it... but back to the main point.

The second of these articles tells us:

How do the people around you influence your body budget and rewire your adult brain? Your brain changes its wiring after new experiences, a process called plasticity. Microscopic parts of your neurons change gradually every day... We also regulate each other with words — a kind word may calm you, like when a friend gives you a compliment at the end of a hard day. And a hateful word may cause your brain to predict threat and flood your bloodstream with hormones, squandering precious resources from your body budget.

So, what does all of this have to do with this week's theme of peace?

I almost started this reflection asking the question what do today's Bible readings have to do with this week's theme — surely they are more about hope! Then I read these articles and started to see the connections.

The Gospel of Mark seems to start abruptly. In contrast, John starts with a poetic prologue that depicts Christ as the Word of God since before creation. Matthew and Luke start with a story of divine predictions while the child is still in utero. Mark, on the other hand, launches straight into the adult story of Jesus responding to John's preaching in the wilderness, quoting the prophet Isaiah.

Both John the Baptist and Second Isaiah were preaching to people who had lost hope. Second Peter was written to a church that was questioning the legitimacy of their hope. My initial reading was to wonder why these were readings for the week of Peace rather than last week with its theme of hope. However, when I read the articles I mentioned earlier, I began to see the connections.

John the Baptist came to preach repentance and God's forgiveness. In daily Jewish life, washing was a ritual. Every little village would have its ritual baths, preferably fed by running water. However, in Jewish life of the day this washing would be done on one's own. The baths even had a separation in the middle — one would enter on one side and leave on the other to make sure you did not accidentally touch another person and so defile them once they were clean.

In his act of baptising people, John accompanies them on that journey to being put right with God. They do not have to enter the river alone, but rather have someone with them who will risk being defiled in order to support them through the bathing. For a first Century Jewish person, this was a revolutionary idea. We often say that actions speak louder than words and here we see a biblical example of this. John's

actions are building different connections in the brains of the people who come for baptism.

This act of John the Baptist is more than simply about offering hope – it is about building relationships. The article I quoted earlier also reminds us:

A surprising disadvantage of shared body budgeting is its impact on empathy. When you have empathy for other people, your brain predicts what they will think and feel and do. The more familiar the other people are to you, the more efficiently your brain predicts their inner struggles. The whole process feels natural, as if you were reading another person's mind...But there's a catch — when people are less familiar to you, it can be harder to empathise. It's metabolically costly for our brains to deal with things that are hard to predict.

Building relationships, as we see by the example of John the Baptist, are essential to building empathy between people, and building empathy is essential to being a peacemaker.

Over the last few weeks we have been watching the violence in Israel & Gaza, with it deteriorating since the cease-fire was broken. There are victims on both sides. We can empathise with the Jewish people without also empathising with the Palestinians. And as people of European heritage, we need to also acknowledge our historical contribution to what is happening now. Historically Christian countries have ejected or massacred Jewish people – the most obvious example being during World War 2, but over the centuries we have seen many other examples – how can Jewish people really feel safe anywhere other than their historical homeland? On the other hand, for 2,000 or more years, the Palestinians have made their home in the land of what is now Israel.

How to be a peacemaker in such a complex situation is a question with no easy answers. There are years of rebuilding trust and relationship that are needed as well as the need for all sides to recognise its complicity in the status quo. Yet where relationship emerges we see the building of peace.

[Daniel Barenboim](#), one of the co-founders of a series of orchestras and music academy that has young Jewish and Palestinian musicians working together writes:

Our message of peace must be louder than ever. The greatest danger is that all the people who so ardently desire peace will be drowned out by extremists and violence. But any analysis, any moral equation we might draw up, must have as its core this basic understanding: there are people on both sides. Humanity is universal and the recognition of this truth on both sides is the only way. The suffering of innocent people on either side is absolutely unbearable.

In our world today being a peacemaker is an essential part of preparing the way of the Lord. We might not be called to make a difference on a world scale, as Daniel Barenboim is, but we are all called to be peacemakers in our society, even when this challenges us to build relationships that are challenging to us.

As we reflect on this week's theme of peace, how are you called to be a peacemaker in your life? Who are the people with whom you find it challenging to be in relationship and what can you do as first steps towards building that relationship?