

Peace - Reflection

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

It is very easy to find inspirational quotes on peace. Just google the phrase and you will see many, many websites on the topic... or at least, it is easy to find individualistic quotes about peace, your inner peace and serenity. What requires more digging is to find quotes about societal and world peace:

"If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner." — Nelson Mandela

"Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures." — John F. Kennedy

"Peace is not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice." — Harrison Ford

"Peace of mind is an oxymoron. If you are at peace in this world, you are out of your mind." – unknown.

"We need to wage peace with the same intensity that others would wage war." - unknown

As tempting as it is to look at our Isaiah reading today in an individualistic way, romanticised as being about *our* peace, this is not how it was intended. The Quaker artist, Edward Hicks got this when he painted the "Peaceable Kingdom."

This painting obviously portrays Is 11:6-9, but off to the side of the beasts and the little children playing together is a scene of William Penn and other leaders making a treaty with Native Americans. Is this peaceable kingdom a realistic hope? It goes beyond the prophetic concern with history to a hope for a new creation. (NIB, p. 259)

When this passage was first read, Israel was threatened both externally and internally. In the first half of our reading, we hear the internal threat. The dynasty of David has become like a stump that looks as if there is to be no more growth. The tree has rotted from the inside, or burnt in a passing fire. Hope for the tree (dynasty) to continue to grow has disappeared and it looks like the future is dead.

Yet despite this bleak outlook of the stump, there is new growth. At the moment, it is just a small shoot, but as we know with our trees here in Australia, a shoot can regrow a whole tree out of the stump. It reminds us that this is not the end, but new beginnings are emerging already, even if they are too small to be noticed.

The imagery in the second half of the reading – labelled as the "peaceable kingdom," reflects on the imagery of the larger nations who were threatening Judah's existence. The Assyrian empire, around this time, invaded and deported the people of the northern kingdom. Now, they are arriving at Jerusalem. Once Judah is defeated, the Assyrian empire will have captured an important trade route of the day. No wonder the history of Israel is the history of conquest between the great nations around them.

Isaiah, in chapter 10, has written of the northern kingdom being “devoured,” of the people being the “prey” of the larger empires, and of those empires, a little earlier in the book, being like roaring lions. Doesn't that change the imagery of peace in today's reading? The nations who are threatening Judah will be part of that peaceable kingdom and both predator and prey will live together.

There is one further dynamic that is worth pointing out. Tradition held there were no carnivorous animals until after Adam and Eve had been sent forth from the Garden of Eden. The imagery of the lion eating straw like an ox harks back to this understanding. All the sin of the world will be undone and creation will return to the ideal relationships that was originally intended.

So it is hardly surprising that it is to these verses in Isaiah that Paul turns when wants to encourage the church in Rome to live together peaceably. Romans is the only letter Paul wrote to a community where he did not already have a relationship, but given that one of the early Christian conflicts was about relationships between Gentile and Jewish Christians, it was to be expected that this was an issue the church in Rome also faced.

Paul alludes to today's Isaiah reading rather than quoting it directly, but the reference to the “root of Jesse” would have reminded the first readers not only of the first part of the reading, but also what comes after it. No longer is the threat another country invading. What Paul assumes this community faces is internal struggles with how to relate to each other despite their differences.

Internal peace is important, but it does not stop there. It is what allows us to build peace with other people around us. I am sure we have all seen what happens without internal peace. I think of a friend who expects everyone to accommodate her bad days, but lashes out if someone else is a bit grumpy or cross because she perceives they have treated her badly. Internal peace allows us to step back and recognise that we are all human, all doing our best (most of us, at least), and even to recognise what might have shaped the other person's response.

How can you live out the peaceable kingdom in your life? This Christmas, when we hear of the angels declaring “peace on earth” how will you allow those words to make a difference for you, your community, and the world which we share?