

Today is the first Sunday in advent, that time when we prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas. This year over the period of advent we are going to be looking at the prophecies of Isaiah and working out what Christmas really means for us.

And today we are going to start by looking at something which is central to the Christian message and to the Christmas story, and I am talking about peace.

Over 2000 years ago, on a dark night over Palestine, as some shepherd boys were guarding their flocks, the birth of Jesus was announced by angels with the words, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." (Luke 2:14 NLT) This wasn't a new idea; many Old Testament prophecies speak of God bringing peace, and many prophecies in the book of Isaiah, refer to Messiah's mission of bringing peace to our world.

Jesus came to bring to peace on earth, the sad fact is that so far, 2000 years since this historic event, peace has escaped us. And through the centuries nations have been at war with other nations. Sometimes nations have been at war with themselves. And even as we meet here today fighting continues in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Iraq, in parts of Africa Asia, South America and elsewhere, man continues to hate and kill man. War and the threat of war continue in many places.

The reality is that our world today does not know peace. Not in the physical sense anyway. But even though the peace we all desire has not yet come at a political or an international level, it can still be experienced at a personal level. We can all know God's peace in our life, regardless of all that is happening in the world around us. Even though nations are involved in conflict, we can still experience peace. Even when the economy is struggling and there is uncertainty, we can still experience peace. Even though there may be turmoil at the office or conflict in the home, we can still experience peace, God's peace, that peace which Paul describes as the "peace which passes understanding."

This morning we are going to be looking at some verses in Isaiah. These verses talk about the "last days". Nowadays when people hear the term "last days" they think of the Left Behind stories, the rapture, the tribulation, and everything else that's supposed to happen at that time. But those are not really the last days. They are the days before the last days. The real last days are described in Isaiah 2; let's listen again to what Isaiah wrote. "In the last days, the mountain of the LORD's house will be the highest of all—the most important place on earth. It will be raised above the other hills, and people from all over the world will stream there to worship. People from many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of Jacob's God. There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths." For the LORD's teaching will go out from Zion; his word will go out from Jerusalem. The LORD will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore. Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD!" (Isa 2:2-5 NLT)

Isaiah is saying that it is God's plan for us to learn to live in peace with one another. And if that is God's plan we can be sure that it will happen. If it's God's promise, it will happen. It might not be happening now, but it will happen in God's time. But until it does we can still experience God's peace at a personal level. And Isaiah is giving us pointers as to how we can do that.

First Isaiah says, learn to walk in His presence. "Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD!" (Isa 2:5 NLT)

What Isaiah is saying is that, even though some of the promises here haven't yet been fulfilled; we need to learn now to walk in the light of the Lord, in anticipation of what God plans to do in the future."

I don't know how many here can relate to this, but I can tell you from experience, when we live in God's presence, we begin to experience peace. And just in case you've never managed this, or learnt what it means, let me tell you what it means to me.

First of all, it means acknowledging his presence. Acknowledging that when we wake up in the morning, God is there with us. Actually I would say we need to acknowledge that God is waiting for us, even before we wake up. And then as we go through our morning routine, making coffee, preparing breakfast, getting ready for work, maybe getting the kids ready for school, or reading the newspaper, or whatever your morning routine might be, he is there with us. And the sooner we acknowledge his presence each day, the sooner we begin to experience his peace.

Some of you will have heard me say before, that the first thoughts that enter my head in the morning when I wake up are rarely about God. And I don't know about you, but I would go further and say that my first thoughts are not peaceful one. That the first thing I think about is, what day is it? And this thought of course leads on to, what am I doing today? If it's Monday it's my day off so I could lie in, and of course it's the one day when I am wide awake from the moment my eyes open. If it's Tuesday, well at the moment I don't have to worry about waking up on Tuesdays so on to Wednesday. Do I have a school assembly this morning? No I don't have to worry about that today, well when do I have a school assembly, what am I going to talk about shouldn't I be preparing for it? What do I have on today, what have I forgotten about? If it's Thursday then I have an early prayer meeting I have to force myself to get out of bed straight away, and if it's Friday, more often than not I haven't got my sermon ready yet and I really need to get a move on or it will be another very late night on Saturday. Saturday, maybe we have to go shopping, or we have a ramble or something else planned etc. And then of course there's Sunday and I have to go downstairs and face all these people and tell them what God is saying, and that can sometimes be the scariest day of all.

From the moment I wake up there are hundreds if not thousands of thoughts that want to claim my attention, distract me from God. And these can be about anything, things which I have to do, or places I have to be in, financial matters I need to deal with, projects I need to finish, maybe situations or people I need to confront, or problems I need to solve. For many of us these thoughts come rushing in, the moment we open our eyes, and it is precisely at that moment that we must learn to say, "Lord Jesus, I acknowledge and welcome your presence in my life. You are here with me right now, and I give this day and all of its challenges to you." There is, or has been a poster somewhere in the building which says 'Lord I know that nothing is going to happen today that You and I can't deal with together'.

Walking in God's light also means, obviously, practicing obedience. It is impossible to experience God's peace when we are not obedient to Him, when avoiding sin is not our top priority. There is a sacrifice we must be willing to make in order to experience peace. We must stop doing what does not please God, and start doing what does.

Sometimes we want to have it both ways. We want to experience God's peace, and still hang on to our favourite sins. Maybe we want God's peace, and we also want to gossip. Or maybe we want God's peace, and also want to get revenge, hey after all, revenge is sweet isn't it? Or maybe it's as simple and basic as wanting God's peace, and also wanting so watch so much TV that we don't have time for prayer and study. The hard fact is that in order to experience God's peace, we have to make a choice, we need to choose between living our way or His way. And if we ever stop to consider the power of God's peace, then the choice is easy to make.

So if you don't have God's peace in your life today I would encourage you to make an effort to walk in his light, acknowledge his presence in all that you do, however simple or insignificant it might seem, all day, every day.

Then we need to learn from Him. I would encourage you to do is to learn His ways. A couple of weeks ago I preached on Isaiah 1 and in verse 17 we read “Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.” (Isa 1:17 NLT), in today’s reading Isaiah comes back to learning, this time he says “People from many nations will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of Jacob’s God. There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths.” (Isa 2:3 NLT)

We are often guilty of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. We are; for example, sometimes guilty of thinking that reading the Bible is something we should do to acquire information. So we learn about the setting and the context, we research the background and try and put ourselves in the situation in the hope and expectation of learning and that’s great, I’m not knocking it, but that is not, and should not be the prime purpose for studying the Bible the real purpose of Bible study is not to acquire information, but to experience transformation. The real purpose of Bible study is, as Isaiah indicates, to learn his ways, why? What for? We need to learn His ways, so that we will learn to walk in his paths.

It’s great to read and study the Bible, it’s great to underline, or highlight, or write a summary or make notes, whatever works for you. But I would dare to suggest that if in doing this we never come to the point of asking ourselves, how does that apply to me and my situation, how does it apply to what I am doing today, how does it apply to the situations that the people around me are facing, then we are not getting the benefit of that study because we are not allowing it to transform us.

So if we read a passage about patience, and make copious notes, and cross reference what we are reading to other passages and don’t examine ourselves to try and work out in what areas of our lives we need to show more patience, then really we have wasted our time, if we don’t live it, we haven’t learnt it.

In order to experience God's peace, we need to learn his word, so we can learn his ways, so we can walk in his paths.

Some years ago, Sheila was allowing the thought of driving in Gibraltar to frighten her to the point that she was not using her car. Every time I talked to her about it she would tell me that she needed to practice. Every time I would point out that the only way to practice was to get behind the steering wheel and do it.

It's an amazing principle; knowledge is only useful when we apply it to our life.

So that in order to experience God's peace, it is no good just being students of His word, we need to become students of His ways. God does not want us to merely acquire information; God wants us to experience transformation. To do that we need to live what we learn.

King David knew this, in Psalm 119 he wrote “Teach me your decrees, O LORD; I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding and I will obey your instructions; I will put them into practice with all my heart. Make me walk along the path of your commands, for that is where my happiness is found.” (Ps 119:33-35 NLT) And in Psalm 16 we find “You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.” (Ps 16:11 NLT)

Joy and peace don’t come from just knowing what is right; they come from doing what is right. And if we want to experience God's peace, we need to become students of his ways and we need to learn to apply the word of God to our daily life.

And then, if we want to experience God's peace this Christmas, we need to let go of conflict. Isaiah says that God's ultimate plan for the nations is that, “They will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore.” (Isa 2:4 NLT)

Isaiah is saying that there will come a day when nations no longer train for war, because it won't be necessary to train for war, because nations won't feel threatened about being attacked by other nations.

Obviously that is not the world that we live in today. But someday, God says, things will be different. Someday, everyone will understand that conflict is a waste of time. We don't know when that will happen on a global scale, but it can begin happening in our heart today. We need to understand today that conflict is a waste of time. If God's ultimate plan is that nation will not take up sword against nation, it stands to reason that his plan for us as individuals is that we will not "take up sword" against one another, that we will let go of conflict and learn to live together in peace.

We hear this theme again and again, as we read Paul's epistles in the New Testament. In his letter to the Romans he wrote, "May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Ro 15:5-6 NLT) In his letter to the Ephesians he wrote "Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace." (Eph 4:3 NLT) To the Thessalonians he wrote "Show them great respect and wholehearted love because of their work. And live peacefully with each other." (1Th 5:13 NLT) And then back to Romans where he wrote "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone." (Ro 12:18 NLT)

God wants us, his people to live together in peace. He wants us to get along with each other. You know I have never come across any verse in the Bible that tells us that God wants us to agree with each other, about everything, I believe we do have to be like the believers in Acts where it says, "All the believers were united in heart and mind." (Ac 4:32 NLT) and I believe that we cannot experience His peace within our hearts if we're intent on stirring up conflict with others.

I don't know if anybody else has noticed what I have, that most inter-personal conflicts are about insignificant things, and sometimes we just need to let these things go. And when we do we begin to feel a lot better, and usually so does everyone else.

Sometimes this entails tolerating other people's faults, sometimes it entails other people tolerating ours, that's a lot easier isn't. Now this idea, of tolerating other people's faults, may sound radical, but it works. And what's more it's God's way. Let's turn again to Paul, in his letter to the Colossians he wrote "Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others." (Col 3:13 NLT) Wait a minute Paul what are you saying, that I have to put up with the things that people do that irritate me? Well yes, just as much as people have to put up with those things I do that irritate them.

God called us to live together in peace. But in order to experience his peace in our life, we must be willing to be an instrument of his peace to the world around us. God says that in the last days, there will be world peace. God says that nations will live together in harmony, and war will be a thing of the past. We don't know when this will happen. We would want it to happen soon, but until it does God is still filling the world with peace, one heart at a time, with those who learn to walk in his light, who become lifelong students of his ways, who let go of conflict and seek peace with others. We can be among those who experience his peace in their lives today, a peace that does not depend upon political stability, but on the presence of God in our life. A peace God wants us to experience, today.

Closing meditation

Those who are into computers may have come across a bumper sticker which is going the rounds on facebook which says, 'Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass...it's about

learning to dance in the rain!' This reminded me of a meditation from 'Word for Today' which was sent to me a couple of months ago.

The meditation is based on a passage in Philippians where Paul wrote, "Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7 NLT)

Catherine Marshall writes, 'A king once offered a prize to the artist who could paint the best picture of peace. Many tried, but there were only two the king really liked. One was of a calm lake. It was a perfect mirror for the peaceful towering mountains all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds.

The other picture had mountains too. But they were rugged and bare. Above them was an angry sky from which fell rain, and in which lightning played. Down the side of the mountains tumbled a waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all. But when the king looked closely he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush a mother bird had built her nest. There, in spite of the rush of angry water, she sat on her nest in perfect peace.

Which picture do you think won the prize? The king chose the second picture. Why? 'Because,' explained the king, 'Peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble or hard work. Peace means to be in the middle of all these things and still be calm in your heart.'

At some point we all discover that there's no safe harbour free from storms; that peace is not the absence of storms, but: (a) the assurance of God's presence and protection in the midst of them; (b) the growth of our faith and character because of them; (c) His rock-solid promise to bring us through them stronger and wiser.