

Sermon 5 December 2010

Advent 2a: Peace

Elly Hillesum writes:

‘Ultimately we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will be in the our troubled world.’ (*Elly Hillesum: An Interrupted life: Letters from Westenbork 1996, Holt Rinehart, Winston*)

How do you image peace?

What does peace look like?

In what areas of your life are you in need of peace?

How do you reclaim Peace?

How do you reflect peace towards others?

Traditionally, the shoot that comes out of the stump of Jesse (in Isaiah 11:1-10) is said to be David and then Jesus. But what if we imagined these words to describe us — the baptised and anointed community here?

How do we create the realm of God’s shalom?

Shalom is the Hebrew word of the healthy wholeness of life that God desires of all creation.

If we are not to judge by what our eyes see, or describe by what our ears hear, this does not mean that justice can be achieved by merely the sights and sounds of the world — rather it affirms that God’s new leader — and we too are not to be distracted by outward appearance.

Hebrew prophets (and ultimately Jesus and Isaiah) condemned leaders bias towards the rich and powerful, and promise as Isaiah does here a new day of God’s reign governed by a vision of shalom:

‘The spirit of the Lord shall rest on them, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.’

The prophet’s use of animal mystery is striking. It harkens back to the theme of creation and recreation.

God is the God of transformation, predator and prey are painted in this vision as a metaphor of God’s power to renew.

Alan Jones in an article entitled ‘*The Function of Art and the Imagination*’ reminds us:

The poet W H Auden pointed out that the purpose of poetry (and all art) is not to enchant but to disenchant. It delivers a dose of reality never yet noticed until the revelation of the poem, the piece of music, the painting.

This vision of Isaiah can unsettle and stir our own imagination.

When we live the vision, we create God’s realm of peace.

Last week I spoke of us being the hope and our challenge today is to be peace in our world.

I return to Elly Hillesum:

Ultimately we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will be in the our troubled world.

We have a vision set before us. How might we live it? How might we create peace?

Listening

Living

Creating community, hospitality (*From Christian Mysticism*, by William Johnston)

Scripture

Eucharist

Community

In today's bulletin we read: *we always have choices, choose peace* inspired by Isaiah and by John the Baptist.

Ronald Cotton and Jennifer Thompson-Cannino (*Finding Freedom*) say:

In 1984, Jennifer Thompson-Cannino testified that Ronald Cotton was the man who raped her. Eleven years later, DNA evidence cleared him of the crime. The two are now frequent speakers of Judicial reform. They live in North Carolina with their families. They appeared together on National Public Radio's *This I Believe* series in March 2009.

Jennifer Thompson-Cannino: I believe in forgiveness — the kind that has the power to release a person from a place of anger and hate, to a place of peace.

Ronald Cotton: I also believe in the healing power of forgiveness. I had gone to prison an angry man and gotten real comfortable with it. But that kind of emotion was keeping me a prisoner in my own private jail. I had to let the hate go, and learn to live and forgive.

Jennifer: I picked Ronald out as the man who had raped me, only to learn 11 years later that I had made a mistake. That was unbearable. In my mind Ronald had been a monster. For 365 days for 11 years, I prayed for him to die. Discovering the truth filled me with overwhelming guilt and shame for mistakenly putting an innocent man in prison. Meanwhile the guilty person was left to commit further crimes on women. I found it almost impossible to forgive myself.

Ronald: Forgiving Jennifer for picking me out of that lineup as her rapist took less time than people think. I knew she was a victim and hurting real bad. But I was hurting too. I missed my family, my girlfriend, and my freedom. But I knew who I was, and I was not that monster. I knew who did this to Jennifer, and he would have gone to his grave leaving me to rot in prison without ever confessing to what he had done. Letting go of my anger to him was hard, but staying free in my heart was a choice only I could make.

Jennifer: I asked Ron if he could ever forgive me. And with all the mercy in the world he took my hands and with tears in his eyes, he told me he had forgiven me a long time ago. At that moment I began to heal. Ronald taught me how to let go of all that pain; his forgiveness set me free that night. Without Ronald, I would be shackled to that moment in time, and it would own me forever. I soon discovered that I could even forgive the man who raped me — not because he asked me to, nor because he deserved it — but because I did not want to be a prisoner of my own hatred.

Ronald: Jennifer and I are friends. And some people don't really understand it. But we were the victims of the same injustice by the same man, and this gave us a common ground to stand on. Together we were able to help each other heal through a shared experience. I could choose to be bitter; I could hate the prison guards and system. But I choose to forgive them all, so that I stay free and not be a prisoner for the rest of my life. (*Excerpted from Finding Freedom in Forgiveness Copyright © 2009*)

God is with us, and God gives us a way out of our dilemma.

‘What dilemma?’ you ask.

This one: the instruction to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us is not about being a doormat.

It's about being free: thus — do not be towards them as they are towards you, Jesus says, for then you will be run by them and their agenda, and you and they, will become even more functions for each other,

grinding each other down towards destruction.

Don't give them any free rental space in your soul.

Instead, allow your identity to be given you by your Father who is in heaven, who is not in any sort of reciprocity with them, and is able to be towards them as one holding them in being and loving them without reacting against them.

In praying for your enemies you are beginning to allow the pattern of desire which is God to enter into your life, so allowing you to recognise your similarity with your enemies, rather than exaggerating the differences which separate you.

It is this which empowers you to be towards your enemy as God is.

This is the message of Christmas

Immanuel, God with us.

Amen