

Isaiah 40. 1-11

Psalm 85

Mark 1. 1-8

We have just heard the urgent start to Mark's gospel. *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* And then the action begins. As a child I used to think that Mark was a sort of cut-price gospel. That because it was shorter than the other three, it was somehow less refined, developed, complete. I suppose it was a bigger-is-better mindset, I was suffering from. And, in many ways Mark does feel a bit cut-price when you look at it. It lacks a nativity narrative and when you look closely at it, it also lacks resurrection appearances by Jesus. Two of the things that we consider to be central to our understanding of the significance of who Jesus was and is.

Over these four Sundays of Advent we mark the weeks out, lighting candles for hope, peace, joy and love. Today we seek peace – central to our being people of the gospel. As we gather each time at the Lord's table, we always share a sign of his peace. *The peace of the Lord be always with you.*

Each week we are sent out in peace. *Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.*

In the birth narrative in Luke's gospel the shepherds are greeted by the angel. The angel tells the shepherds what has taken place and that they should go to Bethlehem; and then the angel is joined by what we have come to know as the heavenly host. The identity of this group of angels which is given to us is rather vague in English, though. A host? What's that? Just a crowd? In truth, Luke names them as the heavenly army, praising God and saying:

*Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!*

Regularly Paul in his letters greets the communities to which he writes: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,*

And an expression Paul uses to conclude the letter to the Ephesians has entered deeply into our liturgical language and sense of what it means to be in the gaze of the God and father of our Jesus Christ: *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

We seek to be a people of peace, in a world of warring madness. And at Christmas people seek the prince of peace only, it seems too often, for this seeking to not land, to not be able to find room to be born or to take root.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, almost two full years ago now and the recent horror which has been unleashed in Palestine and Israel are reminder of how suddenly and brutally military force can be unleashed against innocent people. Is this what people want, I wonder? How is that the calibre of people who prepare for war, who negotiate in bad faith, who issue the orders, who

deceive the populace, who benefit from arms manufactured and traded, get to be people of influence. With the psalmist we might raise our voices:

O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?

It is truly shocking as conflagrations like Ukraine and Israel/Palestine are unleashed, to see the magnitude and complexity of the military hardware that has been designed and made and able to be unleashed, seemingly at a moment's notice. All of it equipment designed to be able to maim and kill – at a distance, now. No longer do men need to fight where they can see the whites of each other's eyes.

What does it mean for us to say that we are people of peace, though? What does it mean for Palestinians and Israelis who gather together to promote peace, to reject war and the kinds of oppressions and the sustained cruelty that has led to the outbreak of events in Israel? It all seems so impotent in the face of the industrial war machine. Why is it that our politicians are so reluctant to call for a ceasefire and why are those who do call for a ceasefire are pilloried and accused of antisemitism?

In the congregation I grew up in there was a man who was highly respected by my mother; a kind and gentle man, the son of a Presbyterian minister and deeply committed to the environment, particularly the local river flats. He didn't drive and so walked everywhere. He was widowed when his three children were in their teenage years. I was in youth group with his two younger children and my connection with them has continued. My mother had great respect for this man; but my father never seemed to mention him. He died about twenty years ago at ninety years of age and I went to the funeral. I can recall the words of Psalm 116 which was read:

Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones.
O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving-maid.
You have loosed my bonds.

It was a very tender acknowledgement of a humble and gracious life. But then, what I did discover at the funeral, something I had never known, even though he had been a presence in my life all those years, was that this man had been a conscientious objector in WWII. Maybe, in those tumultuous years, the recipient of an envelope containing a white feather. He was a man who had the courage to stand apart from the crowd, committed to peace at all costs. All of a sudden, I understood my father's silence about him, at the same time as I also realised the depth of his commitment to peace. The greeting: *the peace of the Lord be always with you* was not a meaningless greeting to him.

The week before last Jenny told us of the Rev Alan Stewart who at 97 years of age was arrested in Newcastle for being part of the blockade of Newcastle Harbour, endeavouring to prevent the

passage of coal ships. He sees that there is green-washing going on around our government's commitment to addressing climate change and was prepared to say, *No: I hear your lies.*

In this electorate over the last decade or so, there has been a group of indomitable grandmothers, dressed in purple, who have lobbied and bothered politicians and loitered on footpaths outside electoral offices and been prepared to publicly to say No, we are not prepared for you to treat refugees with the kind of determined cruelty you have been in our name. These women have been and continue to be sign of another way. And they were part of a wave of Australians who brought about change – slowly but surely.

Every night and day over the last three years the madness and brutality of Ukraine has been beamed into our homes; and in the last eight weeks the horror that is Israel and Palestine has also shocked us by Israel's grim determination to achieve their ends, no matter the cost to the Palestinian people. The carnage is breathtaking. I struggle to watch it though, pay attention, keep track of developments. There is something in me which tells me – a little voice – that it is my duty to pay attention; a sort of social obligation to see it all; and to be horrified and appalled.

All the while, though, that I know I can do nothing or little about it. Maybe I can send some money, certainly pray, sign a petition, write a letter. It feels like I am keeping my part of the social contract – that in paying attention I am deferring to those who lead, in Australia; and those who lead in Ukraine, in Russia, in Israel and Palestine. I want to see, I expect to see them fulfill their side of the social contract. To rule well, to rule justly and with courage in the face of evil. I expect our leaders to seek peace for our Australian people, and I expect those foreign rulers to rule for the people of their own nations and their neighbour with justice and equity. I am angry; I am appalled. I am disgusted by the contempt for human life; for the wellbeing and flourishing of communities; their contempt for truth.

What we do as we share peace and proclaim peace as we gather in worship is that we keep the rumour of the angels' message alive. We continue to sing their song; to rejoice with them and the shepherds and Mary and Joseph and the Christ-child who bore peace in his bones, indeed in his broken bones. To keep alive the longings of the psalmist:

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

May God bless us and those who act for peace, to keep alive in us hope, and the joy of the gospel, that we might be signs of God's peace in small and in large ways, individually and collectively and that our prayer may come to be:

Your kingdom come
Your will be done
As in heaven
So on earth.

Andrew Boyle