

# Peace be with you?



Some years ago two young women, German backpackers, stayed for a short time with us (the Sisters) at Dondingalong. When they left, they presented us with a piece of charred wood on which they had written a message:

*'In case that my country will ever declare war to your country, today I declare to you peace.'*

At the end of World War 2 we, and even some who were our 'enemies', hoped for peace and the end of all wars, but it has not happened. Fear, greed, hate and the desire for power have continued to fuel abuse, conflict and violence between individuals, groups of people and nations.

Sometimes to give or receive peace, we need to protest against a group or nation, even our own, that bullies or attacks those who are 'different'- racially, sexually, or in age, ability or religion. Are we not all God's loved children? Is not difference often something to value and enjoy, as in nature?

The peace we experience in our lives and read about in the Bible, can be of two kinds. There is one which is a cessation of conflict or noise, and another which is a gift from God, and the outcome of faith in a loving God. In Isaiah 11:6-9, images portray God's gift of peace or shalom under the rule of the promised Messiah. 'Shalom' is a greeting between Jewish people which offers peace, justice and spiritual well-being.

Jesus' disciples, being Jews, were hoping for the Messiah. In Mark 4:35-41, they obeyed Jesus and set off across the lake in their boat to an 'other' place. Jesus, tired from teaching and healing, made himself comfortable in the stern and went to sleep. Soon the weather changed and there was a great storm with high waves threatening to sink the boat. The disciples were afraid and woke Jesus to help them. Jesus rebuked the wind and told the sea to be silent and still. The sea became calm. The power of God was demonstrated by Jesus controlling the wind and sea. The Messianic Age was glimpsed but it did not result in peace for the disciples. Instead, their fear of the storm changed to terror when they witnessed Jesus' power! Who was this man they were following?

Peace can be experienced as silence and stillness, but the peace of Jesus for us is not a frozen silent moment. It is the consequence of knowing and trusting God as ultimately in control of *all* things. Such peace can sometimes reach us through nature when we stand or sit quietly in the bush. But peace is difficult to find anywhere if our minds are in turmoil with feelings of rejection or guilt.

In Luke 7:37-50, a woman, judged as a sinner and outcast, was forgiven by Jesus and responded with love and gratitude. She had faith in Jesus' power to forgive her sins, and so was able to receive God's peace. Simon, the Pharisee who condemned her, did not have her faith or peace.

Sometimes we like to be left in peace and not be disturbed or challenged. We criticise others, but not ourselves or our behaviour. We might feel secure and 'at peace' as we live out our self-protected daily routine, but is this *God's* peace?

We believe in God as a Trinity, a puzzling unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer and Life-giver. In this close interrelatedness of three persons is a powerful movement of love—and peace. God wants to share with us this same love and peace. God's peace is not a goal we can focus on and so achieve, but the fruit of our relationship with God in which trust, care and love of others flourish. It is this peace that can reside deep within us when we encounter times of upheaval and fear. Remember, Jesus was present with his friends in the boat

during the storm.

The disciples' boat on the lake is a symbol of the Church which often experiences strife within itself and conflict with the world around it. Faith in God's care and presence when the Church is persecuted, or forgiveness when it repents of its sinful behaviour, can bring it peace.

The peace Jesus offers in John 20:26 confronts the fear, grief and anxiety of the disciples. They are terrified at the sudden appearance of the risen Jesus through shut doors. Jesus greets them, 'Peace be with you'. He gives them a peace honed through suffering and death, and shows them his wounds. The disciples are slowly released from their fear and guilt to be sent into the world to reveal God's love and peace, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Peace can be real and powerful when experienced in quiet unexpected moments, but it can also be present and strengthening in times of danger and distress. It is the result of a loving relationship with God that continually grows in our very being. It reveals the reign of God as a place of inclusion and love, the result of acceptance, suffering, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

When we as the Church gather for worship and say to our neighbours, '*Peace be with you*', it is God's peace that we share. We are desiring for each other the peace and joy of living together in God's love, whatever stress or difficulties we are confronting. This same peace we are to desire for our enemies, those we are commanded to love.

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*July 2018*