

Peace on earth?

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[0:00] Peace on earth, question mark. Please note the question mark.

That was the title I was given and that's what I'm going to talk about! The angels delivered this message of peace.

But isn't it nonsense? Isn't Isaiah's vision a pipe dream? Nothing that makes any sense in the real world. We certainly don't see peace around us today, do we?

The First World War was advertised as the war to end all wars. Peace lasted 20 years. In the 1990s we witnessed the fall of the Soviet Union and we talked of a peace dividend.

But that promise of peace has proved an illusion. Now in Europe we're rearming. The way to peace is the issue that Isaiah addresses in our passage.

[1:30] In chapter 1 he laments the sorry state of morality and sin within Israel. But in chapter 2 he moves seamlessly into the realm of international politics.

Did you notice that? When will this prophecy be fulfilled?

I'm not going to go into that in detail. That's Phil's department. You can ask him about that. But I am going to say that it certainly has relevance to Isaiah's time because of verse 5.

It's not that the descendants of Jacob are told to, well it will be alright in the end so it doesn't much matter what you do now. The advice that Isaiah gives to the descendants of Jacob is to walk in the light of the Lord now.

In the word of the Lord now. And if that's Isaiah's message to his own time, then surely that's Isaiah's message to us at this time as well.

[2:40] But in the 21st century mind there is a jarring here, isn't there? We tend to see personal morality, family and community life, and politics as disjoint areas of debate.

To Isaiah it's all interconnected. It's all about sin. Perhaps we need to regain this perspective at this time in history.

Surely this is just wishful thinking. When will the nations repurpose their weapons for agriculture? Is this the time that the angels were announcing to the shepherds?

Only there seems to be a problem here. Because if you ask what Jesus himself had to say on the subject of peace, it seems quite shocking. So what did he say about the family?

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

[3:59] A man's enemies will be the members of his own household. Jesus is actually quoting the prophet Micah here. It's Micah 7 verse 6.

Micah 7 is all about the breakdown of family life. The previous verse actually says, advises that to guard your words, even against her who lies in your arms.

You can't even trust your spouse in this sort of situation. In fact, if you look at chapter 4 of Micah, there's a passage very similar to Isaiah 2.

They wrote around the same time and around the same sort of circumstances. But Jesus chooses not to quote this. Instead he refers to the bleak words of Micah verse 7.

So that's what Jesus had to say about peace among families.

[5:13] What does he say on the subject of peace between nations? Jesus is equally candid. Matthew 24, 6 to 10 says, You will hear wars and rumours of wars.

But see to it that you're not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nations will rise against nation. Kingdom against kingdom.

There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death. And you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other.

It's a bit bleak, isn't it? Don't be alarmed, says Jesus. That's rather hard advice to take, I think. Surely alarm is the entirely natural reaction to that news.

[6:27] Yet notice there is a word of hope here. Jesus describes this as birth pains. A woman going into labour may very well be anxious.

She is certainly likely to find the birth painful. Yet she can face it with courage because like Mary, she knows that this is necessary to bring her offspring into the world.

She bonds with her new child all the more because of the emotional trauma of the birth. And what's more in a proper family, there's a caring husband like Joseph there.

And he learns as he watches wife and child and their vulnerability to protect that same mother and child and to treat them with love and not harshness. But of course that's not all that Jesus says about peace.

He's certainly not recommending violence as a policy. Absolutely to the contrary, what does he say in the Beatitudes, Matthew 5?

[7:39] Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It's not that Jesus is against peace. He is not. He's just being realistic. The evil in the heart of fallen mankind would seem to make war and conflict inevitable.

And when the gospel is preached, there will be opposition, sometimes violent opposition. But that's not to say that violence should be our go-to policy.

James writes, that the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, and he expands on that a bit, what he means by that, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. Those who work for peace are commended by the scriptures.

[8:52] So what should we make of Isaiah's prophecy? What does he say in the text? Isaiah 2, verse 2.

In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains. It will be exalted above the hills.

All nations will stream to it. So what's he talking about here? Clearly not geology. He's not suggesting that the mountain on which Jerusalem is built will somehow get higher than Everest. Clearly not. What he is talking about is the word of the Lord becoming a beacon of hope in verse 5. So when the angels said peace on earth, they meant it.

The message of salvation is for individuals, but not just for individuals. There's also the hope of nations. It is intended to teach many people to walk in God's ways.

[10:02] That's what Isaiah says. Notice that in verse 4 particularly, he does not say there won't be... Sorry, slow down, Mike.

I'll slow down. Notice verse 4 particularly. Isaiah does not say that there will be no disputes.

Rather, he says, they will have a better way to resolve them. If you're familiar with the story of Saul and Jonathan, you may remember that when they were fighting the Philistines, they had only two swords in the nation.

So what did the people do? They repurposed their agricultural tools as weapons. But when gospel light shines into the world, this should be reversed.

As people understand and respond to God's word, if Isaiah had a slogan, it might be make food, not war. Make food, not war. This is the true peace dividend.

[11:17] All that time and effort and technology can be put to better use. But still, the question remains, doesn't it? Is this realistic?

How is it going to work in the real world and not just in Isaiah's head? Augustine wrestled with this issue during the final days of the Roman Empire.

He wrote a book called The City of God. Because the city of God was not Rome. Neither is the city of God London or New York or Vienna or Paris or any Western city.

Still, there is one thing that most of the pundits seem to agree on nowadays and that's that the West is in decline. You're even getting BBC documentaries about civilisation and how societies unravel. We're all doomed according to the pundits. We need a few more horsemen, don't we? We're familiar with famine and plague and war and death.

[12:37] But we need a couple more horses. We need one for general AI. We need one for climate change. And of course, there's all the old thing of inflation and society breakdown.

To the pundits, we're all doomed. But the only question is, which of those is going to get us first, would it be climate change, general AI, world conflict, or just plain old-fashioned social disintegration?

But like Israel in the time of Micah and Isaiah, like the final days of Rome, the evidence, the evidence is the breakdown of the social contract.

The thing about decadence is that at the time no one really cares. Rome wasn't really destroyed by barbarians. It was destroyed by internal decadence.

It's not really enemies that destroy empires. It certainly wasn't true of the British Empire. It's just that people were no longer prepared to make the moral sacrifices that were needed to maintain it.

[14:08] Isaiah is emphasizing that the word of God is not only relevant to personal holiness, what goes on behind closed doors, but also in the public sphere, even to the matter of justice between nations.

The church itself has often forgotten that, I think. I have to say that as a baby boomer, I'm getting a bit old for this, but I have to say do as I do, do as I say, not as I've done.

We use excuses, don't we? We say things like there's no point in polishing the brass on a sinking ship.

We think the best we can do, the best we can hope for, is to pluck brands from the burning. And so what do we find? We find that much of the confessing church just reflects back the values of the society around it.

A bit like these AIs that just tell you what you want to hear. That's a recipe for, that's a real recipe for disaster.

[15:26] Certainly not what Isaiah had in mind. after all, nobody cares what you say or believe in the privacy of your own room. You can do all the praying and worshipping there as much as you like.

Nobody minds at all. So why did Jesus give us all these warnings to expect opposition? It's when the message is out in the public square that it provokes anger, isn't it?

The gospel is still repent and believe. What does repent mean? Repent means to change your mind, change your direction.

And what is it we are to believe? According to Isaiah, we're to believe that he will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many people. They will beat the sword into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Do you and I actually believe that?

[16:40] Do we really believe that the way to peace is the word of God? We've allowed ourselves to be intimidated, haven't we, for the sake of personal peace.

Leave me alone and I'll leave you alone. If we are out there in the public square, then we're going to expect opposition.

What sort of opposition? Well, we proclaim a gospel of love, don't we? And yet we find the world calls it hate speech.

we proclaim a message of freedom, but the world calls it repression. We proclaim a message and teach wisdom, but the world calls it folly and fairy stories.

We talk perhaps of integrity, integrity. But the devil's pulled a fast one here. Instead of integrity, the world talks about identity.

[17:56] Identity is about being yourself. That's not integrity, is it? I mean, let's face it, most of us are natural hypocrites. We don't want to

be ourselves or at least we shouldn't.

And what about on the global scale? As we've seen, war seems to be the natural state of nations. Some of our best ideas grew out of war, didn't they? There's a dark thread that, from the tempered steel that was used to make a sword that won't break, to the electronic computer created to crack enemy's codes through to the cruise missile and the drone.

War is what we're really good at as humans. And yet, Jesus says, blessed are the peacemakers. Isaiah says, turn your weapons to better use.

Well, this evening, we have a carols by candlelight service.

[19:12] Tradition can be useful. It can be good to look at the past, to understand who we are and how we got here. But that doesn't mean we need to live in the past.

Honestly, I think carols by LED might be a more accurate title. You will have noticed there are no candles on this tree. Too much of a fire risk.

It's not a genuine tree anyway. I think it's a fake. Jesus tells us to go.

And the old hymn tells us to climb the steeps and cross the waves. No, don't climb the steeps and cross the waves. Catch a flight from Gatwick and take the cable car. We sing the old carols, don't we, but we don't take a notice of what they actually say.

Shepherds arise, be not afraid. Your hasty steps prepare to David's city. This is urgent. Your sheep can manage for a few hours on their own.

[20:26] Newborn king is waiting. Don't miss the opportunity to meet him. God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay.

Why? Because the king is born, because Jesus Christ our saviour is born upon this day. If you don't believe that, then the dismay is the perfectly sensible reaction.

We sung this hymn earlier, didn't we? Sages leave your contemplations, brighter visions gleam afar. seek the great desire of nations.

You have seen his natal star. The wise men went to the palace. That didn't end well, did it?

The real irony, of course, is that the palace scholars actually knew the answer to the question they were asked. Where is the king born? In Bethlehem.

[21:29] what Micah said. It's Micah, isn't it? I'm going to check that. What's Herod's response, though?

Didn't end well. His response was not one of joy and peace. His response was violence. We forget that the last act of the Christmas story, which we sort of make into nativity plays.

It was a fly by night to Egypt. It was about murdering babies. If we forget that, then we're not doing the Christmas story.

It's full worth. It's full weight. It's full weight. the real meaning of Christmas is this the desire of all nations has come and as Isaiah understood that must be proclaimed in the public square and it demands a response from each of us shepherd or sage your sheep or your books can wait first seek the king not that sheep or books are unimportant of course they are important but they're not of first importance so Jesus said do not worry saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear for the pagans run after all these things you see that all around us now don't you the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly father knows that you need them but seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well Jesus is the king who came 2,000 years ago the king watches over us today and the king who will come again the news is that we're not all doomed after all we may have to go through the birth trauma though to bring peace to the world and so be it Jesus did that himself we're going to sing with a finish with another traditional carol one that's always slightly different to your typical carol it came upon the midnight clear what does it say oh hush the noise and cease the strife in other words let's have some peace around here hush the noise and cease the strife and hear the angels sing and we'll stop there but the end of this sermon is really this carol as we sing these words thanks a lot thanks a lot