

The Arrival of the King - who brings peace

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[0 : 00] Peace on earth and goodwill to all men. Peace on earth, goodwill to all men. That is the Christmas sentiment, isn't it? But how high on your wish list is peace on earth and goodwill to all men?

What chance do you give it this Christmas? Pick any major human conflict, so Protestants and Catholics, Russia and the Ukraine, Shiite and Sunni, Jews, Palestinians, Liberal, Conservative, Collingwood Carlton.

This Christmas, what chance do you give peace on earth? Pick any major human attempt. What chance do you give the UN at uniting the nations?

How united is the United Kingdom? And with Brexit talks going south, what sort of union is the European one? And of course with Trump versus everyone, how united are the states of America? What chance do you give peace on earth this Christmas? Well it turns out that for one Christmas, one Christmas during a major human conflict, there was peace on earth and goodwill to all men.

[1 : 13] It was Christmas 1914, five months into World War I, and between the trenches of German and allied soldiers in the no man's land in the middle was the strangest peace ever.

I think a lot of you would know about this. Enemy soldiers celebrated Christmas together. They exchanged souvenirs and tobacco, and rumour has it they even played a soccer match.

Although who brings a soccer ball to the front lines, I'll never know. But anyway, Henry Williamson, a 19-year-old private in the London Rifle Brigade, he wrote this short letter. Dear Mother, I'm writing from the trenches.

In my mouth is a pipe with tobacco in it. But wait, in the pipe is German tobacco from a German soldier. Yes, a live German soldier from his own trench.

Yesterday, the British and Germans met and shook hands in the ground between the trenches and exchanged souvenirs. Yes, all day, Christmas Day, and even as I write. Wonderful.

[2 : 13] Here was Christmas, or a Christmas, where mortal enemies enjoyed peace on earth for a time. And that is the key. For a time.

When midnight struck, they went back to killing each other, which is bizarre. Over 100 million people have died violently in human conflicts this past 100 years.

It's been a very dark time for our world. Don't you want, don't you wish for peace on earth this Christmas? And if you like, that's what God's people wanted in Isaiah's Israel, 700 BC.

Have a look at your Bibles and pick up your handouts. We're at point one. You see, even in God's own country, peace was very rare. Israel was a divided nation.

The 10 northern tribes, called Israel, were invaded by Samaria. And the southern kingdom of Judah, which has Jerusalem in it, and God's temple, that was about to be invaded as well.

[3 : 18] Isaiah 7 tells us that Syria and Samaria marched up to fight against Jerusalem, where God's temple was. To make matters worse, in chapter 7, verse 17 and 18, Assyria comes to attack everyone.

Assyria were the superpower of the time. It will not be a happy new year for God's people. Assyria eventually attacks in 722 BC.

They sweep away the whole northern kingdom, the whole 10 tribes of Israel. To this day, Israel has never returned. And what we call Israel in 2018 is actually what's left of the southern kingdom of Judah, after centuries of never-ending conflict.

You see, after Samaria came Syria, and then Assyria, and then the Babylonians, and then the Persians, and then the Greeks, and then the Romans. There's always another enemy on the horizon.

Peace on earth is very rare. It is the same this side of history. After World War I, the war to end all wars, came World War II with the Nazis, then the Cold War with the communists, and then Vietnam. [4 : 33] After Taliban, the Taliban came Al-Qaeda, and then ISIS. It goes on and on. There's always another enemy on the horizon. Don't you just want peace on earth, just for a day even?

Like in Christmas 1914. And so Isaiah looks forward to a time or a day like that. In verse 1, we start in gloom and distress.

But that is all about to change. Nevertheless, because in the humble lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, something is beginning. Verse 2, The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. And Isaiah's dawn is more than sort of souvenirs and soccer matches. It's a nationwide party.

Verse 3, You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy. They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.

[5 : 35] Four times it says joy and rejoice, like the joy of harvest and the joy of victory. And the reason why, verse 4, For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressor.

You see, throughout the history, God's people were always or often at the mercy of their enemies, just as when Israel was oppressed by the Midianites. But Isaiah speaks of a day when God will shatter the yoke and the bar and the rod of their oppression.

Verse 5, Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. This is picture language, picture language for the end of war and human conflict.

Imagine how many tons of army boots have been used in human history. Billions perhaps. You could imagine the bonfire.

How many millions or billions of bloodied military garments have there been? All on fire. And not just for a time, but never to be needed again.

[6 : 52] You see, for Isaiah, one day of peace in 1914 is not enough. He speaks of a new age, verse 1, of total joy, verse 3, because God will shatter oppression, verse 4, and burn up war forever, verse 5.

Only God can give the peace that Isaiah expects and looks forward to. And so here is the moment. Verse 6, For to us a child is born.

To us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. It does raise the question, how is a baby going to succeed and usher in a dawn of peace?

One person doesn't seem nearly enough. Plenty of one persons have had a go. Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Mandela, Bob Geldof, John Lennon.

Surely more is needed than one person. But remember, God's ways are not our ways. Often God gets victory through very weak means.

[8 : 07] There's a clue of that in verse 1, because God wants to begin this new age in Zebulun and Naphtali, of all places. Verse 1 tells us that they're a very humbled or disgraced place.

It would be like building a brand new parliament house in some tiny hick town, rather than in a major city like Melbourne or Canberra or Sydney. Again, at the Battle of Midian, verse 4, it's referenced in verse 4, that's from Judges 6 and 7.

God deliberately uses just 300 men, deliberately, to gain a victory. So he alone would get the glory. And here, when it comes to world peace, instead of using the most mighty military force the world has ever seen, he uses a baby.

It's no mystery, of course, that this baby is the Lord Jesus. God, again, will get victory over sin and death, no less. They are undefeated in the most unlikely way, through the death of his son.

Some babies arrive with big expectations, like Prince William's children, George and Charlotte. This year, my daughter Penelope was born. Actually, she was accidentally born on the doorstep of our house to the whole street, from a standing position, which is no joke.

[9 : 27] So our expect, I don't even know what our expectations for her are after that. We assume they can only go up. But Isaiah expects this son to be a ruler.

Verse 6, the government will be on his shoulders. And of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. Naming babies is pretty serious business.

Lots of arguments and negotiating between mums and dads. Now, I've heard, I've heard of a husband and wife, who, when naming their daughter, the husband said, darling, you can name this baby, if I can watch footy uninterrupted for the whole year.

I've heard, I've heard. The babies born in our church, here at Holy Trinity, were named Penelope, Elka, Sophie, Cheyenne, Eleanor and Jamie.

I doubt the parents of little Jamie were debating whether to call him wonderful counselor. Maybe they'll be getting ahead of themselves. Would, would any parent dare to call their child or to name them mighty God, everlasting father for a baby.

[10:34] That's interesting. Prince of peace. Daniel Andrews, he swept back into power recently. But what if Jesus, the wonderful counselor, was the new premier?

He would know how to fix the transport and crime problems in Victoria. If you read the Gospels, you see Jesus amaze people with his wisdom. His enemies constantly try and trap him with the law and with riddles.

And he just turns the tables on them. He dumbfounds people with the Sermon on the Mount. Still revolutionary in a culture where everything goes.

Another name for Jesus is mighty God. See, the only way you could end war forever is if you can face the armies of the world the way a person faces ants and just squash them.

In the Gospels, Jesus commands a storm to be quiet. And it happens. Because the storm has not forgotten its master's voice. He has power over sickness and death as though they were just sort of dirt on your skin.

[11:40] He takes on legions of demons and evil. He sends it all packing with just a word. Jesus' ministry is a three-year look into heaven. It's a try before you buy, if you like.

And when you read the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, like Matthew's Gospel, the only logical answer for the things Jesus can do for his power is that he is mighty God.

He's everlasting Father. Only God is everlasting. But remember last week, Andrew Price said that Jesus is the word who was with God and was God.

All the power of God, but all the care of the very best Father. And here, his last name, Prince of Peace, which seems to be expressing what Jesus is best at.

So just as Roger Federer is the king of tennis, my mum, queen of curries, Jesus is the prince of peace. It's his speciality, if you like.

[12:44] And the Bible presents two views of peace. So at the end of the Bible in Revelation, the final Jesus destroys God's enemies, establishing cosmic peace and prosperity, is what Isaiah looks forward to.

But before that, the Jesus we meet in the Gospels lives out perfect peace. He turns the other cheek. He allows himself to be arrested.

He accepts a beating and torture, and he walks willingly to die on a cross. And that is where we realize that there are no easy solutions to world peace.

Even for Jesus, his own example and teaching are not enough. More is needed. He must give his life, so this Christmas baby will have to die.

And this is our second point. You see, no matter how huge the wars are between people and nations, they're not the most urgent conflict that needs peace.

[13:48] Not in Isaiah, and not for Jesus. Actually, these human conflicts are all the result of the larger conflict between people and God. And all people are on one side.

All people on one side. We're all sitting in our trenches, firing bullets and bombs at God. And his right rule over our lives and over this world.

You see, the real darkness of Isaiah 9 is that we're all facing God's just and measured response. In the Bible, darkness is often used as a picture for God's judgment.

This is the real gloom and darkness Jesus must address if he's to bring peace on earth and goodwill to all men. And actually, you can see that in these chapters, because Isaiah tells us that for Israel, finally, after centuries and centuries of sin, God had had enough.

And instead of repenting, they kept on sinning. Throughout these chapters, Israel refused to ask God for help and peace. And so in chapter 8, verse 19, do look at it just before our reading today.

[15:00] 8, verse 19. When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?

Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. You see, Assyria and the nations are marching to attack, but instead of turning to the wonderful counselor and the prince of peace, they turn to other things. So mediums and spiritists and idols. And so God allows Assyria to wipe them out. And Isaiah says that peace on earth will always be just for a time while there is no peace and trust in God. 8, 22. It says, Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom. They'll only see war at every border, on every horizon, and they will be thrust into utter darkness, that is, of God's judgment.

And that makes so much more sense of the gloom and the darkness of Isaiah 9. Not the darkness of human conflicts per se, but the experience of God's just and measured response.

[16:22] But, halfway through verse 1, something changes directions. Halfway through verse 1. In the past, he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.

But in the future, he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan. Something new is beginning at Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. Verse 2 speaks of an end to God's judgment.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness, that is God's judgment, a light has dawned. And where does the dawn break? In the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. And that is exactly where we meet Jesus in our second reading, in Matthew 4. So can you please turn to page 968.

Matthew chapter 4. This is our second reading. Verse 12. Let me read.

[17:28] This is point 3. When Jesus heard that John had been put into prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, that's to the north, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali, to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah.

See, as Jesus begins his public ministry, Matthew is quoting Isaiah. He's asking, could this be the son? Will he live up to Isaiah's expectations?

Will he do better than a Christmas day of souvenirs and soccer matches? And it's interesting because the dawn doesn't break when Jesus is born in Bethlehem as a baby, but years later when he's in Zebulun, when verse 17 happens.

From that time on, Jesus began to preach, repent, repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. See, through Jesus, people can have a place in the kingdom of heaven.

And can you see how it begins? Similar to Isaiah's testimony of warning, Jesus preached a word of repentance. One day he will establish peace between people, but first he will address the peace that is lacking between us and God.

[18:46] And so he begins his public ministry by preaching a word of repentance, a testimony of warning, if you like, a message to turn away from our life of sin and turn back to God.

That is our response. And if all that, if just that sounds quite cheap and easy, Jesus' response is much more costly.

You see, someone has to pay for the way we've all turned our backs on God, which means Jesus will have to die in our place. There are no easy solutions to peace, no pat answers here.

Death and judgment stand over us, but Jesus offers to swallow it on our behalf. And therefore, the preaching words about repentance, the preaching of repentance, however uncomfortable and offensive are much sweeter than Christmas songs over the trenches in the war.

Because repentance means God is offering a second or a third or a fourth or a millionth chance to peace with him.

[20:02] Repentance is the first step to coming back to God. And that is the real difference between Jesus and all other human attempts. Jesus comes to bring peace with God first, a permanent peace, not just sort of a Christmas Day truce.

And when Jesus begins preaching repentance in Galilee, when his message is shared in 2018, it is the first light of dawn for anyone who's in darkness.

Anyone, your family, your friends, your colleagues, your classmates, if anyone is willing to respond, to crawl out of their trenches in repentance and ask Jesus for peace, they can be sure what the answer will be from the Prince of Peace.

They will be happily accepted no matter what they've done, no matter what darkness they have walked in, that is Christian forgiveness. Death and judgment swallowed up forever by Jesus.

