

PEACE ON EARTH

Luke 2: 1-7, 8-20

Peace on earth... Are we any closer today than on that first Christmas 2000 years ago?... Think about what's happening right now in Jesus' birthplace... Peace is the last thing people are experiencing... Peace is the last thing Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, were experiencing then too... Why? Well, the reasons are not dissimilar to what is happening in that land today.

First of all, we're told that "in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." What purpose does such a registration serve? It's about taxes. Jews are occupied by a foreign power and such a power forces people to pay taxes from all they have in order to fund the military infrastructure occupying them. Taxes are not collected to build schools, hospitals and roads. Taxes are collected to pay soldiers and especially a wealthy aristocracy who want to keep increasing their wealth. It's no wonder that Jews, like other occupied peoples of the empire, bristled at such decrees. There were regular acts of violent resistance and protest. People were imprisoned and killed. Crucifixion was a public display demonstrating what happens when you fuel any hope for independence and freedom.

Second, Joseph and Mary have to make the long trip from Nazareth in the north to Bethlehem in the south. Why? Because Bethlehem is Joseph's ancestral land and that's where he has to register. Why is he not living in Bethlehem on his land? Why do people leave their homes and homeland? Because they're in search of work and a better future like any refugee the world over. Joseph like many others were probably forced to sell off their land to survive, and once they had no more land to sell off, they had to go anywhere they could to find work. The land is slowly bought up by fewer and fewer wealthy families. A foreign empire needs local collaborators and the Jewish high priestly family and aristocracy are more than happy to play that role with Rome as long as they get a cut of the taxes for themselves. You see how it goes?

The world has changed and it hasn't changed and certainly in that part of the world for Palestinians. Displaced from their land again and again, on the move to find some safety. And occupied by an outside force on the one hand and corrupt and violent internal authorities on the other. And ordinary folk like Mary and Joseph... families seeking any place to go to be safe... tens of thousands dead... and thousands grieving their dead, hostages and all... The story hasn't changed...

Joseph and Mary make it to Bethlehem... Mary is ready to give birth... And even as this is Joseph's ancestral home and land, others now claim it as their own... Joseph and Mary have nothing to go to and no where to stay... Thankfully they find an innkeeper who has some compassion and takes them to the animal shed... Make the best of it Joseph and Mary... Hope the birth goes ok and no one dies...

Wow! Why such tenuous vulnerability? If Jesus is truly to be God's chosen one to pave a path for God's salvation, could God not have made it all less risky? Unless... Unless this story and this birth are intended to shine a light onto something... Perhaps it's about shining a light as to where God is to be found... Not in some palace in Rome and not in some large mansion of a wealthy aristocrat... but maybe exactly where the trouble, the pain and the suffering in the world are... hmm...

But there's more... In the midst of all the vulnerability and the injustice of a cruel world, there is the promise of peace... Really?... Well, it's all in the angels' song: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom God favours." OK, but angels may enjoy some peace in the heavenly realm, but what about us here on earth? The gap between heaven and earth seems especially large when you are Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, or Palestinians decimated, grief-stricken and desperately searching for safety from bombs and bullets. Is it that God is not favouring them so much that they have no peace? Are we in this part of the world and many of us with our creaturely comforts more worthy of God's favour? Or is the angels' song pointing to something else?

Peace is a loaded word, isn't it? Is peace a state of mind or a state of being on the ground in a conflicted world? Is peace an internal thing or an external thing or both?

Peace was a loaded word in Joseph's and Mary's world too. Rome chiselled the word peace on every minted coin and every script on monuments and buildings. It was announced regularly at every market square. Everyone knew of the *pax Romana* or peace that Rome had brought. It's the peace promised by every tyrant, regime or government that declares we will stamp out our enemies, we will eradicate all terrorists, we will crush all resistance movements and erase them, and we will use every ounce of force at our disposal to do so no matter how many people we will have to kill to achieve it. Peace will come from violence and force until there is no opposition and no resistance. Then and only then will we know peace.

But is this the kind of peace this child, born in all the vulnerability and poverty promises? Or is it a different kind of peace that God is favouring?

Let me tell a story, a story of today. Meytal Ofer is a Jewish woman who calls Israel home. Meytal also knows what violence and hate can do. She has known and grieved the death of friends and family due to the violence of attacks from Hamas and Hezbollah. 10 years ago her father was murdered with 41 blows of an ax. Trying to make sense of this horrific act in her grief, she wondered how it's possible for people to have such hate in their hearts to do such a thing?... After the murder she wondered about demolishing the killers' houses as sometimes happens in Israeli-occupied territories. But in the end, she concluded that it would not help anything. It would just grow the cycle of revenge.

And so, what she did instead was join “Parents Circle-Families Forum.” This “forum” is a joint Israeli and Palestinian nonprofit group made up of people who have lost loved ones to the conflict. They hold dialogues, bonding in grief with those on the other side, and they give talks together in different gatherings with the hope of ending the escalating bloodshed.

Meytal and others of the group are often asked whether anything is being accomplished. There is no other choice, they say. Neither Jews nor Palestinians want to give up their homes. Trying to stop the violence with violence for the past 100 years has not worked, and it will not work now either.

So what about the authorities? Do they support the efforts of the Forum? Not at all. The far-right government in Israel has barred the Parents Circle from public schools.

One of the leaders of the Forum is Bassam Aramin. Bassam was imprisoned by Israel as a 17-year old for belonging to a then-banned Palestinian organization and possessing a weapon. He spent 7 years in prison. Then in 2007, his 10-year old daughter, Abir, was killed outside her school by an Israeli soldier firing a rubber bullet. But instead of turning to bombs, Bassam turned to reconciliation. He studied the Holocaust in a master’s program, learned excellent Hebrew and tried to see the humanity in Israeli soldiers at West Bank checkpoints.

According to Bassam, there has been a process of mutual dehumanization of Israelis and Palestinians, whereby each regard the other as morally inferior. Israelis often suggest that the problem is that Palestinians do not love their children and are ready to sacrifice them for the struggle, while Palestinians express similar views about Israelis. They don’t see each other as full human beings, Bassam says, and this is where the root of the conflict lies. He gives the example of a Palestinian mother of a teenage boy killed by Israeli soldiers, who reluctantly came to a Parents Circle meeting full of rage. “They don’t have hearts like us; they hate their kids because they send them to the army” she declared... But then she met an Israeli mother who told her about losing her child to a Palestinian militant, and soon the two were both sobbing and embracing...

Bassam confesses that letting go his rage so that he can see the humanity in the soldiers every day as he passes a checkpoint, is a challenge. But he also sees the fear behind their eyes. They don’t enjoy doing what they are doing, he says, and the conflict itself dehumanizes them while their hearts yearn for something different...

But is there any hope of peace some day? Bassam Aramin believes there is. There is no other way. “We must share this land as one state or two states or five states,” he says. “Otherwise we will share this same piece of land as the graveyards of our children.” He also says that “the arc of history is long... Germany once tried to wipe out Jews and now exchanges ambassadors

with Israel. Someday Israel and Palestine will coexist as states... the question is simply how many corpses will pile up before this happens..."

"Glory to God in the highest heaven! And on earth peace among those whom God favours," The angels sing. But you know, this is a poor translation of the original Greek, especially the last part. "Those whom God favours" with peace makes it sound like God is simply picking and choosing who is favoured and who is not. But a more accurate translation would suggest something like this: Peace among those people of goodwill, peace among those who refuse to capitulate to violence as the way to peace. They are blessed by God even as they continue to live in a world ruled by tyrannical forces, haters and fear-mongers who will only seek peace through violence and war. We must fight the illusion that you can stamp out all enemies till you have none, with the truth that peace can only come when we forgive and let go in our pursuit of justice... Reconciliation is a necessity if we are to live as neighbours with those we have once hated...

The problem as Bassam Aramin the Palestinian and Meytal Ofer the Jew have discovered, is that until you make peace within yourself and find that place of compassion within yourself, you will never know peace externally however many of your enemies you destroy. The child born into poverty and vulnerability in an animal shed of an occupied land is proclaiming that until peace comes for this child rather than a sword, a bomb or a bullet, it is not true and lasting peace...

And so, Christmas must not become some magical escape from the world into an oblivious dreamland as if this is the way of peace God favours. No. Christmas is about recommitting ourselves to the way of peace and to the costly and challenging work of justice with love. Peace will only come and love will only be born more abundantly in us as we take up the challenge to be peacemakers and favour the peacemakers who refuse to give up, even when the warmongers seem to be winning... How will you become a servant of peace this Christmas and beyond?

May God inspire us and may the Christ-child renew our hearts so that we live as God's favoured ones, as peacemakers who learn how to build bridges in all our relations... Amen.