

PEACE ON EARTH

Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 1-19

I can just hear the words of Isaiah's prophecy in Handel's Messiah: "Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of **Peace**." And then, we have the climactic words of our Christmas story in the song of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth **peace** among those whom God favours." Peace seems to be the key word here, peace in a world of conflict and war, peace in a world of bloodshed and relationship turmoil... peace. So what is peace? What does peace mean for you, for me? Is peace about avoiding conflict? Is peace about learning how to tolerate other people with all their differences? Is peace having to let go what you want and what you dream because it collides with what others want and dream? Is peace about walking away?

Well, the prophecy of Isaiah seems pretty clear about what peace is all about. The people have experienced a lot of war, bloodshed and loss. The prophecy is about an end to all that. The prophecy is about a new chapter in a story whose conclusion will be peace. And it all starts with a child: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us..." This child will be a new kind of ruler, one who is innocent and just, free of corruption, faithful to God, fair in his treatment of the people. He will be a king after the heart of the great King David. But is there any doubt that the peace he will bring has to involve military and political power? No. It is hard for the prophet and the people to imagine a messiah king who will bring about any peace worth having without strength of arms and political power. This king must avenge the people's painful losses. Peace means subduing all enemies. It also means the inner satisfaction of giving them a taste of their own medicine. This is justice.

But is that what the Christmas story in our gospel is all about as well? It certainly builds on the prophecies of Isaiah and others. But the very circumstances of the birth of this child are totally outside any popular expectations. Jesus has no recognized royal blood. In fact, his parents are poor peasant nobodies. And in case the reader misses that, we're told that they do not even have enough money to get a room at the local inn as the prices are jacked up with the influx of travelers.

But can't a poor child born to nobodies still rise up and become a great and powerful king? Sure, but just in case anyone has such expectations, the story begins quite deliberately declaring who has real worldly power: "In those days a decree went out from emperor Augustus that the whole world should be registered" for taxation purposes. The whole world is ruled by a king and it isn't Jesus. The *pax Romana*, or the peace of Rome was all about the power of might and the power of Caesar to make the world submit and pay up, or else. You can only have peace through military strength, political backing, economic resources and fear.

So why this song of the angels proclaiming a peace to come through a poor child born to nobodies in a stable among animals, with a feeding trough as his crib? What kind of 'peace' can he possibly bring that's any better or different than king David of old or Caesar of his day?

Well, let me tell a story closer to our time and day. Phyllis Rodriguez had just returned to her apartment building after an early morning walk along the Bronx River in New York. The porter in her building told her there had been a fire at the World Trade Center. Phyllis' son Greg worked there. Immediately, she ran upstairs and turned on her TV. It was everywhere! The light on her phone was also flashing indicating a voice mail. Who was it? A huge sigh of relief! It was Greg assuring her he was ok... But then, right there on TV, there was a plane, a second plane they said, crashing into another building... live... Oh no!... Phyllis would find out that Greg was in that second building... he was one of the 3000 killed that day... Soon there were reports of a terrorist attack. Who would, who could, do such a horrific thing?! It was all so surreal! It was all so overwhelming!

But already, there was a sign that Phyllis was going to live her grief differently than many others... As she was plunged into it all, she felt anger, yes, but beyond the anger, something else gripped Phyllis even more powerfully... It was like a waterfall... empathy... empathy for all those parents around the world who had lost children. She had now entered that community of the grieving... She felt for them all even as she was deep into her own grief.

Now, Phyllis was not a religious person. She would call herself a secular Jew. What she felt was this profound aching, combined with this ocean of empathy... No one had talked about God in that form to her ever before... All she had known about religion was beliefs, beliefs that divided people into us and them. The terrorists were definitely them. There was no room for both

them and us. Peace could only come if there was no them or if they were far away inhabiting some other world. But this was no longer the case. While many around Phyllis were baying for war against terrorists, Phyllis had this other current flowing through her... empathy. The energy flow out of grief could easily go angry or it could go so sad it would become despair... But for Phyllis, it was a deeper ocean of empathic compassion for all the grieving the world over. Where would this empathic energy in her lead?

Well, across the ocean, all the way in France, there was another mother also experiencing profound grief. Aicha el-Wafi was a Moroccan Muslim who had emigrated to France at the age of 17. She felt welcomed then. She became a citizen. She loved her country. Her husband though was a different story. He never felt at home. They had a child. They named him Zacarias. As much as Aicha gave her heart and all she could to Zacarias, he grew up with a lot going against him. His father became violent and abusive. Eventually, he left. While Aicha moved on, Zacarias was still only a child and the whole experience marked him in profound ways. And then, growing up as a Moroccan Muslim in a France which was increasingly racist, Zacarias continued to suffer abuse. They called him a 'dirty Arab' and unlike his mother, he felt a stranger in his own country. He was the perfect candidate to be recruited by al-Qaida.

Two days after 9/11, Aicha got a call. "Turn on the TV. Zacarias is on the news!" Aicha couldn't believe it! Zacarias looked horrible. He was being accused along with many others of participating in the plot to execute this horrible atrocity! But how could this be? Zacarias had been in a US prison from August, well before 9/11, for a visa violation. How could he be responsible while in prison. Besides, he was just a teenage boy. He was being manipulated by others. Something was terribly wrong!

Aicha eventually got a call. It was Zacarias. He was unrecognizable on the phone, totally broken. He admitted that he had joined al-Qaida, but he swore he had nothing to do with this horrible act. But of course, no one would believe him. Already the public was calling for revenge. Aicha knew what she had to do. She had to go to the U.S. herself. She felt personally responsible. Extremist hate fueled by groups like al-Qaida was responsible for what had happened. And yet her son was also her responsibility. She loved him. She had to help him any way she could.

Now here's where the story gets even more fascinating. Once Aicha arrived in the U.S., she met a group of family members of the victims. How could she face them with the weight of shame she was carrying? But in that group was Phyllis. Phyllis immediately went to Aicha. The two fell into each other's arms, weeping. Phyllis didn't see Aicha as a 'them.' She saw her as a mother, a mother who was also grieving, just like she was grieving. Maybe Aicha's child was still alive, but think of all the shame wrapped up in her grief. At least Phyllis could hold Greg's memory and spirit in her heart with pure gratitude for all of who he was. Aicha was living an ongoing grief for a son who would spend a lifetime in prison, a son she believed was innocent, yet one who was also lost and broken.

Phyllis would stand by Aicha all the way. This love, this connection, past the us and them, this was the kind of healing Phyllis needed for this ocean of grief in her. Empathic love would lead to the kind of healing and inner peace, no amount of revenge and war could offer. This love, this connection, was also the kind of healing Aicha needed for the ocean of grief and shame she was carrying. But with Phyllis by her side, she would not carry it alone. Where would this energy flow of healing love between Phyllis and Aicha lead?

Well, it led to drawing in other women, other mothers, mother's against war, and specifically, against the invasion of Iraq. This was not the answer to all the pain, the hurt or the hate. The answer was love. The answer was building bridges. The answer was empathy for one another and mutual understanding of context and history and experiences, human to human, all children of the same God.

And this, my friends, is also, very much the story of Christmas. Jesus is born in profoundly vulnerable circumstances. Peace in the world will not come through military might, political power, economic superiority. No. Until people learn how to build bridges through the vulnerable openness of heart to heart, person to person, across cultural, economic, class, gender and religious divides, there can be no real and lasting peace. Peace begins in the everyday, with you and me, with us and them. Are we growing in our understanding or our mistrust, our compassion or our hate? Are we building bridges or bombs in our hearts and minds and budget priorities? Are we aiming to crush the opposition or seeking ways to create cooperation? Are we cooperating with the burden of restrictions to keep everyone safe during this time of pandemic, or is it us protecting our so-called freedoms against the world?

Maybe the powers that be are much more into following a Caesar kind of power. Peace has to be enforced. Love has no real power to make peace. But perhaps, some of us worshipping this hour, may hear the song of the angels anew: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favours." That's you and me. We are favoured to become the ambassadors of peace, every time we open our hearts in vulnerable openness of love to others. The answer is not another Caesar who can bring the world into submission under the banner of fear. The answer is a child, born in a stable, vulnerable and exposed, revealing that the way to true peace is empathic love for one another across all our divides...

May it begin altogether new, for you and me, for us, this Christmas; Amen.