

Advent 2020: “A Cry for Peace”

20 December 2020 - Led by David Boyd

Welcome

Advent Candle Lighting: Mervyn & Raing McCullagh

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 324 It Came Upon The Midnight Clear

Prayers of Adoration & Confession: Jennifer Wilson

Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5

Reflection: *O Come, King of Peace*

Sermon:

*O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind
Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease and be Thyself our King of peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

That is our verse from “O come, O come, Emmanuel” for this last Sunday in Advent and it’s all about the longing for peace. But if we have learned anything from living through this year it must be that that longing doesn’t look like being fulfilled any time soon. For a start, we are not as secure as we thought we were. We have had our lives turned upside down by the Coronavirus, something that came out of the blue to remind us that we are a lot more vulnerable than we had previously thought. We have watched populist leaders turn nations that were settled and stable into hotbeds of division and strife. Their unscrupulous manipulation of people through misinformation and outright lies strikes at the very foundations of democracy and the rule of law. In many parts of the world war is raging and, as always, it’s the innocents who suffer, caught in the cross-fire, ravaged by famine and disease, and pushed from pillar to post when they try to flee the fighting as refugees. We don’t need convincing that our world is a dark place; but then, it was ever thus.

Isaiah found himself in a similar situation. He was called to be a prophet in the year that King Uzziah died. During Uzziah’s reign, Judah had enjoyed a prolonged period of peace and prosperity which had encouraged a complacency, a laxness, and a drift away from the one, true God.

In Chapter 1, Isaiah spells out the destructive result of the people turning their back on God. Their religious practice had become merely an exercise in going through the motions while ignoring God’s demands for justice and mercy. There is widespread corruption among the leadership which God cannot let go unpunished, and yet through it all runs the possibility of redemption and restoration. There is more than a hint of the carrot and stick approach about it. Their behaviour has been such that judgement is certain, but the hope of a different future is held out for those who listen and repent. Isaiah paints a dark picture of impending doom, but that occasional glimmer of hope peeping through suggests that doom will not be the final outcome. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our text for today. After the catalogue of folly that represents Israel’s current choices in Chapter 1, the bright future that Isaiah now paints stands in glorious counterpoint to the darkness that has gone before. That is what makes this such a great Advent text.

Advent begins in the dark but it doesn't stay there. As Isaiah will go on to tell us in chapter 9, "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past, He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future He will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan – The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

That light that Isaiah is talking about is, of course, Jesus. Isaiah will go on in chapter 9 to call Him the Prince of Peace. He calls Him that, because without Jesus there is no hope of peace. Without His perfect life, sacrificial death and game-changing resurrection, the possibility of peace would not even be on the table.

Our inability to stop doing things that are wrong means that we are all under a death sentence and unable to save ourselves. But! - and it's a big but - Jesus' taking of our sin upon Himself and dying in our place on the cross means that when we trust in Him, we will receive His righteousness and be adopted into the family of God. For those who are in God's family, the future looks bright. In fact, it looks just like Isaiah describes in our passage. He tells us that "in the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains" (v.2).

In the Old Testament, up a mountain was where you went to meet with God. Isaiah's readers would immediately think of Moses climbing Mt. Sinai to meet with God and receive the ten commandments. What Isaiah is saying, when he talks about the mountain of the Lord's temple being established as chief among the mountains, is that in the last days it will become obvious that the God of Israel is *the* God.

Isaiah tells us that "all nations will stream to it." They will say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths." They will all come as students to learn about God and how to live in the way that God wants us to live; in the way we were always meant to live. Isaiah's vision is not accidental – he wants to remind the people of Israel, and us, that help and guidance comes not from our own devices, but from God, and more specifically, from God's Word.

"The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." All these students will learn God's ways from His Word. They are going to study it and put it into practice, and what will be the result? "He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." Peace will reign!

God will arbitrate between the nations. He is the ultimate authority and He will sort out any disputes. There is no need to train for war because disputes, the cause of war, are removed from us. So, as we sit here in the darkness of Advent, it's a chance to imagine the world, not as it is, but as it **should** be, and Isaiah paints a beautiful picture for us. Our instruments of death and destruction – weapons – are not just set aside, they are transformed into instruments of life and growth. As these are put to work, the earth is transformed from a battleground into a beautiful garden. Peace reigns!

Something that has always been a blessing to me in all the time that I've been here is Stephen's Green. Any time I have to go up into town, I always walk through Stephen's Green. No matter what is happening in my life at the time, I always feel better after walking

through it. That little glimpse of God's beautiful creation in the middle of the city has a way of lifting your spirits like nothing else. But it doesn't happen by accident! When you walk through the Green, there is always a squad of gardeners hard at work making sure that it continually looks its best.

As I was writing this sermon and thinking about the whole topic of peace, I was reminded, as I was saying earlier, that the Hebrew word we translate as peace is actually *shalom*. *Shalom* describes a state of affairs that allows total human flourishing, where everyone is living to their full potential. *Shalom* comes about when all of our relationships are transformed into what they should be — whole, healthy, complete, made right, and ordered by love and mutual respect.

To me, Stephen's Green is a picture of *Shalom*. It has that manicured look that you know only comes with a lot of care and attention to detail. There's not a blade of grass out of place. It's perfect! Just like *Shalom*. And God doesn't just want that in little patches like Stephen's Green, he wants to see that perfection, that shalom, enveloping the entire creation, to return it to the way it was always meant to be.

The people of Israel thought that when the Messiah would come, he would liberate Israel from the Roman occupation. But Jesus didn't come to overthrow the Roman empire by force; He came in humility and love to completely transform the world. In spite of our complicity in so much of what is wrong with the world, we too trust in the transforming power of God to bring all things to completion. We trust that God is, in fact, using us. We wait. And we trust. We trust in God for the fulfilment of all things, and for our own transformation into people who can see God, who reach out to touch God. Who collaborate with God in God's ongoing work in the world.

If you can remember back to our studies in Ephesians, you will recall that God's will, "to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment — is to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10). That is what Isaiah sees here — all nations coming together under the Word of the Lord. Only then will *shalom* be possible throughout the earth.

So what does all this mean for us, living in Dublin on the cusp of 2021? Well, since we have been adopted into God's family, it is natural that we go into the family business. That's what collaborating with God in God's ongoing work in the world means. We are to become *shalom*-makers. If that sounds a little strange to you, then just think back to the sermon on the mount. When Jesus pronounced the Beatitudes he said, "Blessed are the *shalom*-makers (or peacemakers,) for they will be called sons and daughters of God." Do you see? Making *shalom* is the family business, no question!

How do we go about that? Well, Advent is a good place to start, because it's about preparing for the coming of the Messiah or, if you like, about preparing to go into the family business. It's about self-examination. This is about opening our eyes to the truth about ourselves, about the world we live in, and about what we have to do to make things right. This is about looking squarely in the mirror and facing up to the flaws, the imperfections, the downright ugliness we sometimes see there. This is about taking time to think hard about how I've run away from God this year; how I've not always told the truth; how I've rationalized my words, my attitudes, and my actions; how I've not always been the best neighbour to those around me. If we are going to be working in the family business, then those things need to change.

Then, preparation complete, we move on to the actual work of making *shalom*. For this I want to take you back to Stephen's Green as a metaphor for *shalom*. Remember what I said about the squad of gardeners that are always there, working away, to keep the Green looking its best? They are the *shalom*-makers, and they take their instructions from the head-gardener. The head-gardener walks around and he sees what needs attention. He, or she, sees what needs to be done in order to improve what's there -what needs fertilizer; what needs pruning; what needs a more sheltered spot; what needs tying up; what needs staking. He, or she, is always looking for ways to make the Green the best that it can be.

So, if we take that analogy and apply it to ourselves as the gardeners and the Holy Spirit as the head-gardener, the process of making *shalom* might go something like this. As we go about our day-to-day business, we look for ways in which we can help those around us to blossom and bloom. We pray and ask the Holy Spirit to show us where we can be agents of *shalom* and ask Him to help us be a blessing, wherever we find ourselves. We talk about this with each other and encourage each other in our efforts to see God's desire for *shalom* realised all around us.

It strikes me that we could use our 3D groups as our horticultural college in this regard. When you are in your group, be looking at your fellow group-members and ask the Spirit to help you bless them so that they blossom and bloom. We could make it an intentional part of the life of the group where you could practice your *shalom*-making before unleashing it on the unsuspecting public. If you are not in a 3D group yet, then get with the programme. Find a group to join and learn how to become a *shalom*-maker. I know that the groups are finished now for Christmas but if I can make a suggestion to the leaders, when you recommence in January start with discussing this sermon, for this is our proper work.

How great would it be if, during this time of social-distancing and mask-wearing when we are cut off from other people to a large extent, that we used the time to prepare ourselves for the advent of the vaccine and the re-opening of society. When life gets back to normal, and we trust that it will, let's be ready and equipped to play a proper part in the family business, bringing *shalom* and being a blessing wherever we go. Because in the end, what Isaiah offers us is not only a vision of global transformation, but an invitation to live, and to work, toward that day. . . so I am going to leave you with that invitation – "Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Praise: This World Belongs To God

Prayers for Others: David Boyd

Closing Hymn: IPH 321 Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Announcements

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

Discussion & Application:

Fight: *Peacebreaking* - sacrificing people and peace to win or get what we want - is characterised by insults and attacks (James 4:1). Think of some examples of peacebreaking in your life and in our world from the past year.

Flight: *Peacefaking* - pretending things are good even when they aren't - is characterised by denial and avoidance, caring more about the appearance of peace rather than actual peace. Think of some examples of peacefaking in your life and in our world from the past year.

Flourish: *Peacemaking* - seeking restoration and reconciliation through the application of the gospel and living according to God's ways - is characterised by discussion, mediation and accountability, by seeking God's glory in a given situation and the prosperity of others.

When we act as peacemakers, we follow the example of Jesus, who reconciled us - His enemies - to God through His death. Read Romans 5:1-11, reflecting on this peace we have with God, and take time to praise God for this peace.

*O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind
Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease and be Thyself our King of peace.*

Pray these words into specific situations, both locally and globally.

How can you seek to be a peacemaker this week? How can you help others "blossom and bloom"?