

Sermon 12 December 2021 – Luke 3: 7-18, Phi 4:4-7  
Finding Peace.

Peace is word we see lots in the weeks leading to Christmas, on cards and decorations, in carols and readings. It's helpful as a greeting for someone who is having a difficult time and maybe the words Merry Christmas don't seem quite appropriate. It crosses the boundary between secular and Christian celebrations.

A few years ago, we took the children to Disneyland Paris in the week before Christmas I was amazed and disappointed that in all the decorations, lights, displays and parades, there was not one mention of the nativity, not one stable or manger, not one Christmas carol over the PA. Yet, a quick google search this week showed the entrance to the 'It's a small world' ride lit up with the words Peace on Earth surrounded by doves. No one can take offence if you wish them Peace. And yet, we see from this passage in Philippians, it is a blessing at the heart of the Gospel.

Paul's prayer for the people of Philippi is that they receive "The peace of God which surpasses all understanding." The words, which are familiar from the liturgy, I have noticed more often in our prayers and reflections over the last year or so. I don't know if they have been used more, or I just noticed them because they seem so timely. Covid and all the limitations associated with it, has meant that we experience uncertainty and restriction in our plans, concern for the development of the young and care for those who are older or more vulnerable. Things we have taken for granted, accessible healthcare, plentiful supplies, being able to see our loved ones when we want to, eating out, meeting with friends .....can no longer be counted on. We are privileged and there are many who are worse off, but, as we approach 2 years of the pandemic, many of us may be feeling drained, unsure of the future and disturbed about the effect on those we care for. At times when we feel least in control, it is a comfort to know that God is in control and has a plan even if we don't see or understand it. Perhaps, that is why those words have stood out for me this week and why those are the words I have chosen to reflect on.

Reading this short passage, you can't help but see the contrast with the reading from Luke. In the gospel we hear John the Baptist, angry and frustrated by the lack of understanding of the crowd. By their inability to act on his message and their disregard of the urgency of the situation. We hear John explaining the need for action to tax collectors, soldiers and all who came to him. And John was right to do this. He had an important calling, a task to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.

Yet, I wonder, as we make our own preparations for Christmas in a pandemic, do we risk becoming too concerned about the jobs we need to do, how we will accommodate the needs and wishes of many different people. Conscious always of the advent calendar, ticking off the days. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul seems to be saying, take a step back from all this, pause, make sure that Jesus is not merely included in all that you do, but is central to it.

I realise that I have set myself an impossible task to try to talk about something that is said to be beyond understanding, but I have put together a few thoughts which may help.

Firstly, I can tell you what peace, in this context, is not;

- It is not peace as the opposite to war. There is no agreement or treaty peace is a gift from God to those who worship him. Paul's words immediately follow his instruction regarding a dispute between two women in the church. Paul does not suggest a compromise, or that anyone give in to the other, but rather urges them to come together and be of the same mind in the Lord.
- Peace is not the opposite of busyness. Lockdown and the pandemic have emphasized how much we can feel unsettled and disturbed when there is little to do and little going on around us. Those who are alone, perhaps crave peace most of all. Conversely, some people can breeze through the most trying, busy, chaotic lives staying cool, calm and collected, whatever life throws at them.

- It is not a reason to shirk responsibility. Paul urges us to pray and to trust God with our anxieties and concerns, but this does not mean that we don't have a part to play. James reminds us in his letter, of the need for both faith and works, one without the other is meaningless.
- Peace is not a free pass to an easy life. Paul wrote these words from prison, Zoe told us last week of the hardship and difficulty he must have been suffering at the time even though Paul himself does not dwell on this. Paul's wish is for the people of Philippi to flourish, to grow in love and discernment. At the end of chapter 3, Paul tells the people how Jesus will transform them into citizens of heaven. Transformation implies change which often comes through challenge and discomfort.

Having thought a little about what peace is not, I now want to focus on what it looks like. I wonder if you can think of a moment when you have unexpectedly experienced God's peace. A time when, even if just briefly, you felt that assurance that the world was as it should be.

I remember standing at the bus stop on Westbury Road one morning many years ago and thinking how beautiful the Downs were. The clear blue sky contrasted with the green grass and, to my untrained eye, all the ratios and perspectives in my view seemed to be right. It was a very ordinary occasion, yet something extraordinary happened in my heart.

It may seem trite in our current circumstances to dwell on small moments of tranquillity, but I think it is important to capture these times when all seems right with the world. Perhaps it is at these times, that we catch a glimpse of the mystery of God.

Then maybe you can think of a time when you or someone you know has experienced peace, despite challenging or difficult times. John the Baptist found the time to respond to all who came to him with questions, even the Roman soldiers and the tax collectors. All were made to feel equally valued.

Peace in this sense is something which we feel in our hearts, even if we cannot grasp it with our heads. We have conviction that God is in control even if we don't understand how this has come about, and it is this conviction which Paul says will guard both our hearts and minds.

Peace is associated with blessing and not really something that you can strive for, but Paul tells us how we can prepare ourselves to receive it.

- Rejoice – We must always celebrate the things that God has done for us. Celebrating Jesus as Lord and Saviour, even when we don't always feel joyful, encourages and strengthens our loyalty and obedience to him and helps us to recognise that God is in control.
- Be gentle and gracious so that everyone can be included and encouraged in the celebration. Peace is something to be shared. It is hard to be at peace if those around us are troubled.
- Pray – Praying about everything, the good and the challenging, the things we think we can control as well as those we know we can't, re-enforce our commitment to God who is truly in control. Prayer can overcome anxiety and guide us towards thoughts and deeds which embody the gospel.

For Paul, these are not optional extras. If we are to be transformed into citizens of heaven, we must nurture these habits. Like any form of training it becomes easier with practice until the traits of joy, gentleness and prayerfulness become part of who we are. Later we will exchange a sign of the peace with each other, we will leave this building with the final words of our service ringing in our ears, "Go in peace to love and serve the lord" and over the next week or so we will arrange decorations, write cards and sing carols all proclaiming peace. Yes, there is much to be anxious about. We live in challenging times. But we serve a loving, faithful and eternal God who cares for us and who is waiting to pour out his peace, if we are willing to receive it.