

## Sermon Archive 228

Tuesday 25 December, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Isaiah 9: 2-6

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



One of the people in the photo looks like she's got bit of life experience - maybe seen a bit of the complexity of life. Her hands look like they're used to hard work - the finger nails are plain. She looks like she's used to multi-tasking. Here she dandles the child with one hand, while making a peace sign with the other. Wonderful image, isn't it? Making peace with one hand, cradling the child with the other. Is this raising a child for the living of peace? The teacher, the taught. The older, the younger. The wiser, the smaller. The experienced, the naively, tenderly new.

God knows she's going to have to juggle a lot if she's going to teach peace in a world like this. In this world we have things like displaced people and refugee camps. We have easy violence and ruined homelands. Forming a new generation for a life of peace . . . what's

she going to need?

An ancient prophet, long ago, wondered. And in his prophetic imagination came the phrase “wonderful counsellor”. Good counsel - wise, guiding advice. She’s going to have to guide that child, and do it with wisdom. Not necessarily a mind like a trap, not necessarily a knowledge of many, many figures and facts. But wisdom, experience, that slow-grown, hard won experience of life. To have learned from the mistake. To have learned from loss. To have maybe been hurt. The kinds of things that form the heart, the character, the soul. If she can be wise for that little child, then maybe peace can be taught. The child in one hand, the peace sign by the other. Wonderful counsel, the forming of a sign of peace.

Another word forms in the prophet’s imagination: “mighty God” - room in the world for the might of God. And what is might but movement, but guiding, but divine persuasion? So come the God people - telling their ancient stories of promises made to a people who as yet were nobodies. Stories of escape from slavery, running for freedom. Stories of daily bread in heavenly manna. Poems and songs about the love, the generosity, the giving that lies at the heart of all things. The God-stories that put forth shoots of hope, that make people pray again, that seem somehow to be small lights shining in dark places - like the mystery of joy sustained when reality said “no joy here”. If she can put those god-words into the life of that child, if those god-words can in any way be mighty, then maybe peace can be taught. The child in one hand, the peace sign by the other. Mighty God, the forming of a sign of peace.

A third word comes to the prophet: everlasting father. She is no father; she’s a mother. The father is not a presence in this photo - but what do we spot on the fourth finger of her left hand? A ring. So, though we do not see him, and cannot say for sure that he still lives, we know that he has been part of this story. Anyway, whether mother or father isn’t really the point. The point is

“everlasting”. This is a parenting that is committed. It doesn’t exist one day, and flee the next. It doesn’t “play” at loving - it is serious. It doesn’t wax and wane - it is everlasting. So if she can teach this child an unconditional love, if she can be a person of sacred vows and commitment, if she can leave the child feeling safe in the conviction that “I am loved”, then maybe that will make for peace. And so the provision of a pink spotty onesie for the child. The very deed of cuddling the child in her arm. The looking across into the child’s face with a mother’s look. The wanting of peace for that new life. The child in one hand, the peace sign by the other. Everlasting parenthood, committed care and love, the forming of a sign of peace.

Wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father . . .

The photo is actually taken in a refugee camp in Turkey. The mother and child come from Syria. So this family needs peace. It needs for the world to have wonderful wise counsel. It needs for the world to have its healing, strengthening God-stories of hope and joy. It needs for the world to have everlasting love. This picture of this woman holding her child is precious - and we can learn. Wonderful image, isn’t it? The teacher, the taught. The older, the younger. The wiser, the smaller. The experienced, the naively, tenderly new.

But wait, into the prophet’s imagination comes one more phrase: prince of peace. And that’s a curious one, for it arrests us with the claim that in the classic picture of the mother and the child, it is the **child** who is the Prince of Peace. “For a **child** has been born to us; unto us a son is given, and he is named wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, Prince of Peace.” In this photo the peace sign is not in the fingers of the woman - it is in the child she cradles. It’s absurd; a child can’t teach us peace. A child can’t change our hearts. A child can’t arrest the attention

of a battered world. That wouldn't make sense; it'd be as silly a claim that God appears in flesh.

Yet look at the face of the woman in the photo. She's just looking at the child, she beholds him, and uses her one free hand to make a sign of peace. Has she not learned something? Has she not been taught? And have we not also? For thousands of years after the birth of a child in Bethlehem, we gather year after year to tell the story - to put angels in the sky to sing of peace, to affirm the quiet claim of Christmas that the world is different now. In a new birth, in the coming of a vulnerable brand new person, things have changed for human beings. We have been called to care - to nurture, to protect. Somehow in knowing that we are needed, that we need to approach new life with carefulness, something *is* different. A child in a manger is a strange, strange sign of peace - but it seems to change those who behold it.

Of course he will grow - he will become the wonderful counsellor - they'll say he speaks not like the scribes and Pharisees, but with a depth and authority of truth. He will develop a godly might - become a person-changing force in his world. He will demonstrate in so many ways a parenting of humanity that surpasses the world's understanding - the everlasting father (unconditional). ***All that*** will come. But indeed, today that is to come. At Christmas his work begins, simply because he has been born and been given to us. He awakes in us that brittle instinct to care - to respond to vulnerability by loving, caring, worshipping. Here, in this birth, salvation begins.

Indeed, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. A mother holds her child. Humanity is called to care. People are changed. The Prince of Peace.

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