

13th December 2020

Bible reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

Peace

What do you like best about Christmas? Spending time with family and friends? Christmas trees? Presents? Carols? A season of goodwill when we put past hurts aside? I certainly like all of those things! But are those things what Christmas is really about?

I love Christmas, and most of us love getting cards. We try to avoid Santa cards, and we go for "Religious Cards" that have images of the real meaning of Christmas. But even they are unrealistic: They make nativity look cute. You've got fluorescent figures; you've got Mary dressed like some kind of blue nun. You've got grinning cows and the ox and the ass look so happy. The hay smells like Chanel no. 5. And the 3 wise men looking so dapper after their long desert journey. Realistically, this is no Disney princess film where it's all wonderful and finishes so beautifully!

This would have been difficult, it would've been hard, it would've looked quite different. You see, because of our brokenness and the way that we've messed up, the King of the world Jesus comes from the highest heaven to lowest earth. He's born as a baby. Do you ever think what does that actually look like?

The God who threw the stars into space becomes a baby for you and me. You know when babies are first born, they can't get proper eye contact at first, they can't move their arms properly at first, there are lots of things that they can't do. The Saviour of the world became a baby boy for you and me. Isn't that remarkable?

When we think about a nativity scene, at the centre is the baby, Jesus. Of course, we love babies! Babies are great. Royal babies are front-page news. But after the baby is born, we move on. We mark the Queen's birthday, but that's about it. We don't keep on remembering birthdays for hundreds of years. There is, of course, one exception: Jesus. At Christmas we remember his birthday. And every time we write a date we count from when Jesus was born, give or take a few years. What was so special about Jesus that we make such a fuss about his birthday? A long time before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote:

*"For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end..." [Isaiah 9:6-7]*

Isaiah prophesied that the coming messiah would be 'Prince of Peace.' He would heal that age-old fracture and bring us peace with God. Then Isaiah continues, "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end..." One day Jesus will defeat sin and bring peace to the whole world. It's a wonderful prospect, isn't it? We all want peace! How much is peace between man and God worth? God has given us the greatest possible gift.

We all long for peace in our lives, and yet peace is sadly lacking in our world. People are full of worry and anxiety. Relationships are full of conflict and stress. The world is full of conflict and wars.

But that's where Jesus comes in. Because Jesus is not only our hope at Christmas, he is also our peace. And it is only in Christ that we will ever truly obtain peace on earth. As Bill Bright once said: *"There will never be agreement at the peace tables of the world or rest in the individual heart until the Prince of Peace reigns supreme in the hearts of men."*

But what does that peace feel like? Are these just pleasant words? I'd like to tell you part of a testimony of someone who found Jesus and found peace.

In 1972 the Vietnam War had been going on for 17 years. In the summer of that year, South Vietnamese planes dropped a napalm bomb on a village which had been attacked and occupied by North Vietnamese forces. The flame from the napalm struck a nine-year-old South Vietnamese girl called Kim Phuc. It burned the clothes off her body and she fled naked. A 21-year-old Vietnamese photographer, Nick Ut, took a picture of her fleeing. It became one of the most iconic pictures of the Vietnam War and it possibly helped hasten the end of the Vietnam War.

An ITN film crew happened to be close by. The reporter on the crew, Christ Wain, stopped Kim Phuc and poured water over her. Nick Ut then took her to a British hospital. A little later Chris Wain visited her in hospital and asked a nurse how she was. The nurse told him she would die the following day. He got her moved to a specialist plastic surgery hospital. She remained in hospital for 14 months and had 17 operations.

In 2001 Denise Chong wrote a book about Kim Phuc's life entitled, "The Girl In The Picture". Then, in 2017 Kim Phuc wrote a book herself. She wrote:

"There was a story beneath the story told there, a divine underpinning that for many decades even I could not detect, a set of spiritual stepping-stones that, unbeknown to me, were paving a path to get me to God. That is the story I wish to tell in these pages."

In her book Kim Phuc told how she was in physical pain from the burns, but she had a deeper pain. "What I desired more than healing for my wounds and hope for my heart was peace for my troubled soul." Kim Phuc had grown up in the Vietnamese religion of Cao Dai. She looked for peace there, but did not find it. Then on one occasion she was in Saigon's central library. She was looking at books on religion. She found books on Bahá'í, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Cao Dai – and a New Testament. She started to read the New Testament and discovered that Jesus had been mocked, tortured, and killed. He had been wounded. He bore scars. "Perhaps he could help me make sense of my pain and at last come to terms with my scars", she thought. And so it was, on Christmas Eve 1982, Kim Phuc invited Jesus into her heart.

A couple of years ago, Kim Phuc did an interview with Christianity Today magazine. She reflected back on the service at which she committed herself to Jesus. She said:

"The pastor spoke about how Christmas is not about the gifts we give to each other, so much as it is about one gift in particular: the gift of Jesus Christ. As I listened to this message, I knew that something was shifting inside me.

“How desperately I needed peace. How ready I was for love and joy. I had so much hatred in my heart—so much bitterness. I wanted to let go of all my pain. I wanted to pursue life instead of holding fast to fantasies of death. I wanted this Jesus.

“So when the pastor finished speaking, I stood up, stepped out into the aisle, and made my way to the front of the sanctuary to say yes to Jesus Christ.

“And there, in a small church in Vietnam, mere miles from the street where my journey had begun amid the chaos of war—on the night before the world would celebrate the birth of the Messiah—I invited Jesus into my heart.

When I woke up that Christmas morning, I experienced the kind of healing that can only come from God. I was finally at peace.”

That’s Kim Phuc’s testimony. Jesus had brought her peace – peace that she hadn’t found anywhere else. That is the gift that Jesus offers. Jesus told his disciples:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” [John 14:27]

Last week we thought about the hope that Jesus brings. Like Simeon when he saw Jesus’ parents bringing Jesus into the temple. He’d been hoping to see the Messiah and now he had. He then says:

“Sovereign Lord, as have promised you may dismiss your servant IN PEACE, for my eyes have seen your salvation” [Luke 2:29-30]

Simeon’s hope was fulfilled. Now he had peace. God was working out his great plan of salvation.

In Luke chapter 2 we meet the shepherds. After the angel gives his good news, a multitude of the heavenly host appear. They praise God, saying:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth PEACE among to those on whom His favour rests.” [Luke 2:14]

There is only one thing this heavenly host wishes God’s people. They wish for peace. Of course, they do! That’s exactly the reason Jesus came into our world: to bring peace between man and God.

Peace is one of the great themes of the Bible. If you look up how many times various qualities such as love, peace, joy, hope, patience, courage, compassion and so on appear. You probably won’t be surprised that love is the most-mentioned quality. Can you guess what is in second place? It is peace.’ Love drove God to find a way to restore the broken relationship; to restore peace. Truly, Jesus is the Prince of Peace.

I’m coming towards the end, but I need to say one more thing. If you follow God you get peace with God. But it doesn’t mean that Jesus brings peace in every other area of life. Jesus told his disciples:

“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” [Luke 12:50-52]

Not what you expected, perhaps? Peace with God doesn't guarantee peaceful family relationships. Shortly before he was crucified Jesus warned his disciples of what was coming. He told them:

"Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." [John 16:32-33]

Peace with God doesn't mean living peacefully with the authorities. But don't worry, Jesus tells us. I've dealt with the world.

We read in Colossians 1: *"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."* (Colossians 1:19-20)

Do you have peace with God this morning? Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins so that you could be forgiven and restored to right relationship with God. If your faith is in Christ, then you have peace with God.

Do you have peace with your self this morning? If your faith is in Christ, then Jesus has not abandoned you but has come to live in you by his Holy Spirit. And he offers you his peace. *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."* (John 14:27)

Do you have peace with others this morning? If your faith is in Christ, then he has given you all the resources you need to do your part in living in peaceful relationships with those around you. And after you have done your part, you may ask Jesus in prayer to work in the other person's heart that you may live in peace.

Do we have peace on earth this morning? Oh, how I wish we did! We do not have peace on earth yet, but we have the promise of peace on earth to come, and God has never yet broken a promise.

The angels proclaimed to the shepherds that first Christmas Eve: *"Peace on earth, goodwill towards men!"* (Luke 2:14) Those words of promise still ring in the air this Christmas season as we worship and adore the Lord Jesus, our Saviour, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace.

So, how do you get this peace? If you haven't done so already, you do what Kim Phuc did. You say yes to Jesus Christ. You repent of sin that separates you from God, and you invite Jesus into your heart.

Prayer:

Thank you, O God, for this Christmas season. Thank you for time with family and friends, for Christmas dinners, for presents and Christmas trees. But what we really thank you for is that you loved us so much that you gave us your son, that he came to save us from our sins and that through him made it possible for our broken relationship with you to be restored. Thank you for the wonderful peace that we now experience as a result of being right with you, Amen.