

Isaiah 9 and Luke 2

Time to Talk

We heard two readings, one written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, and the one written afterwards. Have a think, then have a chat, did you notice some ideas they had in common?

King David, darkness and light, birth of a child, gift/good news, peace/ endless peace, host of angels/Lord of Hosts, release from oppression/Saviour Messiah,

A child comes, at a dark and difficult time, he's a gift from God, he's a rescuer, and he will bring endless peace

It may be pushing it a bit, but I also wondered if there was a connection, a contrast, between the horrible clothes of war mentioned in the first reading (garments rolled in blood) and the clean white wrappings they put on the baby Jesus. It made me think of our collection of tourniquets for Ukraine, where we have to remember that warrior's tramping boots and clothes with blood on have become the tragic norm. It was like that in Isaiah's time, it was like that around the Roman empire when Jesus was born, and it's like that in Ukraine, in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Israel, in Sudan, Myanmar, Yemen, and in other countries today.

So how does the birth of Jesus bring peace? It's important to note that God, coming to earth as Jesus the baby, Jesus the man, brings peace in two ways. The first way is to show the way of peace to each human being, child, teenager or adult, who accepts him. Humans are often at war, or having arguments, and are often fighting against God, as well as against each other. Even the innocent humans who don't want to go to war can find, in those countries I mentioned, that war comes to them. And the nicest person has an odd kind of war within themselves, the battle St Paul talked about when he said he knew what good things he wanted to do, but he still sometimes did the opposite. That's what I mean about the way we're at war with God - we know the good and we sometimes choose not to do it.

The baby Jesus grew up to be our rescuer, our Saviour, the one who sees that battle we have in ourselves and dies to put things right. He allows each of us to come to God through him, and that war inside us can end, as Jesus brings us into the peace of God, in his power, rather than in our own attempts. Some of us here in church this morning brought that battle of ours to Jesus years ago, some of us only did it recently, some of us maybe haven't yet decided to come and lay our lives at Jesus' feet yet. But whether we first came to Jesus years ago or whether it's the first time we face that decision today, everyday life with Jesus involves coming back to him every day, and laying down our lives before the God who came to live with us, who shared our human nature, and died to rescue us from its negative side.

So this is one way, one huge, real way, that Jesus brings us peace as individuals. It may be the way you've heard taught most often, the way that works best for your personal spirituality. But possibly, the other way Jesus brings peace is more powerful to you. War and injustice are growing around us. Members of our church family are from countries I mentioned in my list of countries at war. The times are unsettled, to put it gently for our younger listeners. Anger and fear war within us: how can this violence and oppression be tolerated? If this is how you feel, you're right – there is no place in God's kingdom for the abuse of power, for violence, for what Isaiah calls the rod of the oppressor. Working for a just peace, through prayer, letter-writing, donating, campaigning, education and action, is working for the Kingdom of God. Some people have had this action forced upon them. Some have felt it as a call of conscience. Maybe more of us, here in Luxembourg, feel it as a growing anxiety, the concern which, when we sang of hope during Creationtide, left us wondering what kind of hope we can actually see in the world today.

It might be tempting to use the nostalgia and cosiness of Christmas to avoid looking our world in the face today. But here is the baby born Prince of Peace, and he surely challenges us to recognise both of the ways he offers peace to us today. We don't get to choose which of the two ways suit us both, Jesus offers this gift in one package:

Come to me, and I will give you peace

Come to me, and you will be peacemakers

This Christmas, we need the peace of Jesus through coming to him in prayer, repentance, thanksgiving and rest – yes, rest in Him!

This Christmas, we share the peace of Jesus through our prayers and action for peace and justice in the world.

You may find, looking into yourself, that you tend to either one or the other. I think I've done both in my time – sometimes I've been a worker for peace and justice, and sometimes I've been in a time of spiritual growth and resting in God. But the reality is that neither of these types of peace work on their own. Focus on spiritual growth without asking Jesus how he is at work in the world, is at risk of becoming inward-looking and maybe a bit self-indulgent. Focus on activism without asking Jesus to be at work in us, Christian activists tell us, is at risk of becoming bitter and turning into the very thing you protest. So, looking inwards, and looking outwards into the world, let us commit our lives to Jesus, our Prince of Peace, today.

Let's bow our heads and pray!

Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, I bring you my life and I bring you our world. Work your saving, rescuing power in my own life, in my family and friends, in my country and in our world, today and always. Amen