

Peace on Earth?

In a recent webinar on clergy pensions, attendees who responded to an on-line poll considered the number one risk factor in the next 12 months to be that of armed conflict somewhere in the world. The poll was small and hardly a representative sample, But I suspect that apprehension is shared much more widely in the population, given the year we've just had. Hopefully the Christmas season is still one when hostilities are paused (as, famously, in the trenches of the First World War). People may welcome the opportunity to push news and fear of conflict to the back of their minds, as they enjoy the festive break. Those attending church services may particularly tune into the proclamation of peace which is a dimension of the message of Christmas. In the prophecy of Isaiah, one of the titles for the coming Messiah is *Prince of Peace: of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end*; while on the shepherds' hillside the angelic host announces peace on earth. If we home in on that announcement we find a variety of translations: is it a declaration of peace on earth as a whole, coupled with goodwill towards, or among men (and women)? Or is the peace restricted to those on whom God's favour rests?

Whatever the translation difficulties, it's pretty clear that the peace presented to humankind in the birth of Jesus needs to be received to be effective. Christmas gives us a picture of what is possible, if only we would embrace it. In his carol about the angels' message and conscious of civil unrest in his native America, Edmunds Sears laments: *man at war with man hears not the love song which they bring*. We should also understand that peace (*shalom* in Hebrew) means more than the absence of armed conflict: it implies wellbeing and positive human relationships. Even if the grace in the angels' message is from God, goodwill between people remains essential. God is not going to delight in anything less. Hostility towards migrants on our streets is as much a violation as the war in Ukraine. Those who claim support for such hostility from a supposed Christian identity are at odds with what God is saying to us through his Son: he is not a tribal deity.

Of course, there is material in the Bible which could be read that way. In the Apocryphal book the Wisdom of Solomon, we read,

*When peaceful silence lay over all and night was in the midst of her swift course,
from your royal throne, O God, down from the heavens, leapt your almighty Word.*

It's such a powerful evocation of the incarnation that it is used as a Christmas refrain in Common Worship Evening Prayer. But in its original context, the reference was to Passover; the Word of God came like a warrior, dealing out death to the Egyptians' firstborn: God acting with violence to defend his own. The scriptural justification is that such extreme action was rendered necessary only by the stubborn ruthlessness of Pharaoh and led to the liberation of the Hebrews from their enslavement, forced to work on the king's building sites.

The God who speaks to us through his Son is still a God of justice. But Jesus did nothing in his ministry to encourage a hostile reaction to Roman dominion. Instead he demonstrated care and respect to all people – except those who criticised and sought to restrict such activity. John describes the Son as *full of grace and truth*. And when things came to a head, he worked his act of liberation not by imposing suffering on his potential enemies, but by taking it on himself: as St. Paul puts it, *making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*. Although that is many years away for Jesus, it won't be long before Herod appears in the Christmas story, with violent consequences. The peace Jesus bestowed on his followers was not a guarantee of a conflict-free life, but assurance of the presence and power of divine love in testing situations. As he observed, that kind of peace is not generally available in the world; but it is available through him. It is an aspect of the gift that God offers us when his almighty Word leapt down to a risky and troubled world; even if, for the time being, peaceful silence lay over all.