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## **Practicing Peace (Ephesians 2. 11-21)**

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‘I have come to the view that God’s love is fundamentally about the practice of peace. God is love, and, therefore, God is our peace. We practice peace not just because it seems like a nice idea, but because peace is inextricably associated with becoming human’.<sup>1</sup> These words are from Michael’s Preface to his wonderful and clarifying book, *Practicing Peace*. They distil its key themes and (for me) bring alive a perspective on the gospel that I realise I’m in danger of skating over far too lightly.

‘Peace’ is one of those words that can start to pass you by. Like motherhood, who could be against it? Some of you might remember the scene from *Miss Congeniality* when, one by one, all the contestants in the beauty pageant profess their profound commitment to ‘world peace’. So when Jesus is called ‘the Prince of Peace’, when he says ‘blessed are the peacemakers’, when Paul begins each of his letters with the greeting, ‘Grace to you and peace from God’, we don’t often ask what’s really being said or sense a radical new possibility opening up. But the New Testament does. It speaks of the gift of a ‘peace that passes all understanding’, a ‘peace that the world cannot give’. What is this peace? How does it matter? And how do we learn to inhabit and practice it?

Michael points out that: ‘There are lots of ways of making peace, if we think of peace as the absence of immediate conflict. For example, we can make conflict go away in the short term by silencing, expelling, or killing those who disagree with us’,<sup>2</sup> those who ‘disturb the peace’ so to speak. We’ve seen this kind of pseudo-peacemaking just this week with the murder in the Amazon of journalist Dom Phillips and indigenous activist Bruno Pereira by those vested in an exploitative status quo.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Wood, *Practicing Peace: Theology, Contemplation and Action* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), p.xv.

<sup>2</sup> Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.4.

But of course, ‘this apparent peace’, this cessation of disturbance, ‘can only ever be temporary’, because (says Michael) that which we violently exclude will inevitably resurface in a new form.<sup>3</sup> Think of how victory in war so often sows the seeds of future conflict; or how the suppression of dissent (in a society or in a family) inevitably leads to more discontent which one day bubbles over again.

So peace that endures, lasting or deep peace, cannot be defined merely as the absence of overt conflict. It has to do with right or restored relationships. It involves mutual accord, a sharedness of life where we do not live at each other’s expense, but lovingly, attentive to and delighting in the good of all. Michael’s book is about how we learn to practice peace at this level – in our families, communities, organisations and in relation to the natural world. And this calls, he says, on the whole of our being – head, heart and hands.

Head, first! What makes us believe that authentic peace is possible? That it’s sourced in reality and not just in wishful thinking? For Christians, our understanding of the meaning of peace and the possibilities of true peace-making are sourced in the person and work of Jesus – in what he does and how he suffers. For it is Jesus who reveals that peace belongs to the nature of God and is the fulfilment to which all creation tends.

He refuses to participate in cultural mechanisms that keep an uneasy kind of peace, that deal with human rivalry and threatenedness by means of violence, suppression, exclusion. Think of his refusal to join in the stoning of the woman caught in adultery, his eating with the outcast and unlovely. Proclaiming God’s forgiveness and unconditional welcome, he restores people’s relationship to themselves, to community and offers the possibility of abundantly shared life – *shalom*. In the process, he reveals just how enmeshed in violent forms of so-called ‘peace-making’ human culture is. Ultimately the authorities categorise him as a disturber of the peace, and he is dealt with in the usual way: ‘You do not

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<sup>3</sup> Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.4.

understand', says the high priest in John's gospel, 'that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed' (John 11.50).

Still Jesus endures in the midst of it all, a still point in the storm, in a spirit of forgiving, reconciling love. And when, in the resurrection, he returns to his disciples, inviting them yet again to restored and renewed relationship, he greets them every time with the words 'Peace be with you'. The peace he bestows on them in these encounters is not the quasi-violent peace of conflict averted or denied, the 'system' maintained, but the peace of God which is sourced in peace and experienced as acceptance, wholeness, belovedness, grace. This is a peace that cannot be destroyed by the world's violence and is offered to us all.

And it's *this* reality, this new possibility for human being and community living beyond threat, rivalry and anxiety that the letter to the Ephesians is celebrating. Where once there were two communities, Jews and Gentiles, feeling the need to define their identities at each other's expense, locked in hostility, now the total non-necessity of all this has become apparent. Now the old mechanism for sustaining apparent peace – 'the law with its commands and ordinances' – has been abolished. 'For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us' (Eph.2.14).

As Michael puts it, 'Jesus carries the violence of human wrath, as if through a lightning rod-cable, into the ground of his death. By being raised as the forgiving victim, Christ reveals the reality of God's unconquerable life – a life that transcends our rivalries, forgives us for them. and will have no part in our death-dealing'.<sup>4</sup> 'So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father' (Eph.2.17-18). What makes us believe that authentic peace is possible? Because peace is the nature of God and the truth of our lives.

But how do we get access to this peace as a lived experience? We might be inspired by the vision of 'one new humanity' at home in the peace of God, but almost

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<sup>4</sup> Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.53.

immediately we're tripped up by our own threatened, defensive, rivalrous tendencies – our habits of competing for recognition or belonging or life, which (in subtle and not so subtle ways) make us enemies of each other, and get in the way of our being at peace with ourselves and of practising peace on earth.

This brings us to the work of the heart. For peace is not just an idea or vision, but involves the transformation of what Michael calls 'our ego's defensive security and belonging needs'.<sup>5</sup> And here what's required is that we do our 'inner work', that we become aware and take responsibility for our way of being in the world. What are the stories I tell about myself or others that perpetuate division or alienation? What are some of my default reactions? What can I learn from my dreams or from feedback or by reflecting on my experience? And how might I forgive? All this inner work is undergirded and enabled, says Michael, by a practice of contemplation which cultivates our capacity for attention and interior spaciousness, and so opens us to the Spirit of God gently 'making us into a people of peace').<sup>6</sup>

And, finally, this inner reconciliation and availability leads to the work of the hands – and the question of what Buddhists call, 'skilful means'. It's all very well to be committed to peace, and even to be engaged in the inner work that makes us more capable of practising peace. But how do we actually approach those difficult conversations? How do we go about restoring fractured communities and relationships? How do we create spaces where no one is even unintentionally excluded or silenced, so that genuinely shared vision and action might emerge?

The final part of Michael's book explores peace as a practice, an art we can begin to learn and a process we can intentionally design for all kinds of organisational and community contexts. He speaks of dialogue, listening and circle processes, of restorative justice, reflective practice and nonviolent action, and teaches what he calls the choreography, the steps in the dance between power and love, that is at the heart of peace.<sup>7</sup> All this is grounded in his own experience of

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<sup>5</sup> Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.152.

<sup>6</sup> Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.134.

<sup>7</sup> Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.201.

designing and hosting collaborative conversations oriented towards participating in the life-generating peace, the *shalom*, of God. And it leads to a profound vision and call for communities such as ours.

‘I carry a quiet hope’, Michael writes, ‘that Christian communities might be places where every member is on a lifelong journey of practicing peace’.<sup>8</sup> He concedes that this might sound like a big vision, given the frailty and failings and oftentimes violence of the church. But, he goes on, ‘Imagine the church throughout the world as constituting an *international academy of peace*, focused on the Christlike God, shaped by contemplative prayer, and practicing the art of dialogue. This could be a small contribution that Christians could make to the world’.<sup>9</sup>

And I wonder, what would it be like for us to see our life at Benedictus in terms of our learning together to be practitioners of peace – not only within this community, but in all the places we live and work? ‘I hope and pray that this book might be useful as a resource for the journey’, Michael writes. It is indeed that. One of my hopes is that, in due course – as part of our Waterhole offerings – Michael may visit again to lead us in the practicum, and so to continue ‘to guide our feet into the way of peace’ (Luke 1.79).

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<sup>8</sup> Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.222.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.223.