

The Way of Peace (Luke 1. 57-79)

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‘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). Jesus’ words to his disciples towards the end of John’s gospel sum up the proclamation of peace that permeates his story from birth to resurrection. ‘Peace be with you’, the risen Jesus said to his shattered friends; ‘peace and good will to all people’ sang the angels at his nativity. ‘For he is our peace’ declared the letter to the Ephesians. He has broken down the hostility between us, creating ‘in himself one new humanity’ (Ephesians 2.15); and in him we have access to ‘the peace of God which surpasses all understanding’ (Philippians 4.7).

Well, you don’t need me to spell out the painful – even grotesque – incongruity of this Scriptural celebration of Christ’s gift of peace in the face of the world as we know it. As I speak, terror and war are wreaking havoc in the Holy Land – in Gaza and Israel, while war in Ukraine, Sudan and God knows where else grinds relentlessly on; there’s violent unrest and merciless exploitation within nations, amidst communities, against the natural world; division is wilfully fomented by those who profit from it, while fractured relationships within families lead to violence of every kind – from the terror of domestic abuse and femicide, to psychological cruelty and emotional neglect. There at times it seems we’re as far from a state of peace as we can imagine ourselves being. The Prince of Peace has come, so the Church proclaims. But really, what difference has he made? What then is the point of preparing to receive him more deeply and anew? These are questions I’m suggesting we ponder this Advent season.

So let’s start from the beginning. The reading we just heard depicts the birth and naming of John the Baptist, whose vocation it is to ‘prepare the way of the Lord’. John’s father, Zechariah, inspired by the Spirit of God, tells out the meaning of his

newborn son in his hymn of praise, known as the Benedictus. And it helps to be reminded that these events emerge out of an archetypal backstory.

You might remember that Zechariah is a priest of the Temple in Jerusalem. Elizabeth, his wife, is also descended from a priestly family. Both are said to be 'righteous before God, living blamelessly' in accordance with the law. But up till now, they've had no children, 'because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years'. You know what this signals! The scene is set for one of Scripture's miraculous conceptions and accompanying annunciations.

As part of his priestly duties, Zechariah had entered 'the sanctuary of the Lord'. He was there on his own, chosen by lot to offer incense, while 'the whole assembly of the people was praying outside' (Luke 1. 9-10). Suddenly 'there appeared to him an angel of the Lord'. When Zechariah saw the angel, 'he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard"' (Luke 1. 13-14). Commentator Robert Tannehill remarks: 'Apparently, the barren couple had prayed for a son'. But actually it's not just about them. As Tannehill goes on, 'what is about to happen is God's response to a larger prayer also', a prayer for the fulfilment of God's promise to redeem the whole people of Israel.¹ For, as the angel tells Zechariah, their child 'will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God' (Luke 1. 16). And here we get our first inkling that his mission will have something to do with peace.

Speaking of the yet to be conceived John the Baptist, the angel goes on: 'With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord' (Luke 1. 16-17). These words in Luke allude to the prophecy of Malachi in the 5th century BCE, who had declared that before the Lord comes to his people, he will send the prophet Elijah. 'He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse', says the Lord (Malachi 4. 5-6).

¹ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp.44-45.

Tannehill points out that where ‘Malachi ... speaks of a mutual turning of parents to children and children to parents, ... Luke ... speaks only of the turning of the parents (literally, the “fathers”) to their children. This’, he suggests, ‘places primary responsibility for reconciliation on those who had power and authority in ancient society’.² But, in any case, the theme of peace has been introduced. And when John is actually born, Zechariah makes it explicit: ‘and you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways’, by the forgiveness of their sins, calling people to turn from that which separates and divides them. And when the Lord himself comes, so this gospel proclaims, he will ‘guide our feet into the way of peace’. New Testament scholar David Neville summarises the point: ‘according to Luke, peace is integral to the theological meaning and significance of the births of both John and Jesus’.³

So what is it about Jesus that enables peace in a new and distinctive way? Why do we need this ‘dawn from on high’, the advent of God among us, truly to know and practice peace? This is the heart of the theme we’ll explore in coming weeks. For now, let me offer three touchstones to orient our reflections.

The first concerns the *nature* of the peace of God. Michael Wood has said ‘there are lots of ways of making peace if we think of peace [merely] 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’.⁴ But of course, ‘this apparent peace’, this cessation of disturbance, ‘can only ever be temporary, because that which we violently exclude will inevitably fight back in a new form’.⁵ This is the tragedy we see playing out in Israel and Palestine today – where every supposed ‘victory’ or suppression of violence only sows the seeds of future conflict. So peace that endures, lasting or deep peace, cannot be defined merely as the cessation or avoidance of overt conflict. It has to do with right or restored relationships. It

² Tannehill, *Luke*, 46.

³ David Neville, *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), p.95.

⁴ Michael Wood, *Practicing Peace: Theology, Contemplation and Action* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), p.4.

⁵ Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.4.

involves mutual accord and sharedness of life, where we do not live at each other's expense, but are lovingly committed to the good of all. As Malachi put it: the hearts of parents turned to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.

In the language of the Ngunnawal people, I learnt recently, the word for peace is *Narragunnawali* (pronounced narra-gunna-wally).⁶ It means aliveness, well-being, coming together. In the biblical vision, the word 'shalom' also expresses a richly relational vision of peace, a peace which is liberating and uncoerced, marked by compassion, mutuality, joyful giving and receiving, 'reciprocal enrichment'. Rowan Williams says this 'is the peace Jesus creates between God and world', and among the human family, 'because it is the kind of peace which exists between him and his Father'.⁷

And this leads to my second touchstone. Rich peace, shalom, narragunnawali – this we long and are made for. This is our truest humanity and our fullest life. And yet, it seems at some level persistently elusive and even, at times, alien. To share in God's relational, compassionate, reciprocally enriching involvement asks something of us. Williams says it requires us to give up fantasies of control and invulnerability. It involves the willingness to be 'a part of the world, a moment in a pattern, dependent on others, others dependent on ourselves'.⁸ 'It means the risk of response, decision, listening and answering, attending to a constantly shifting environment' with 'the patience of attentive love'.⁹ And none of this is easy. We are so often injured and afraid, so often faced with the hostility or violence of others, so often taught to see in terms of difference, division, entitlement and threat. The divine culture of peace is radically counter to the world's culture of war, and the light of Christ reveals the extent to which we are, like it or not, enmeshed in violence from which we cannot liberate ourselves. We need to be given a way.

⁶ <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/narragunnawali/>

⁷ Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God: peacemaking in troubled times* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1983, 2nd ed. 2005), pp.31-32.

⁸ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.42.

⁹ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.43.

Which is, finally, what we're promised by the coming of Jesus. And note – it is 'a way'; not a steady-state, not a once-for-all deposit of undisturbed tranquillity, but a way of peace, a road to travel, a practice that draws us ever more wholly into loving relationship with ourselves, with God and with all our fellow creatures. Advent invites us to prepare the way of the Lord. How we learn to follow where he leads will be our theme next week.