

## The Real Hope of Peace Advent 1 – 28<sup>th</sup> November 2010

### **Readings:**

#### **Isaiah 2: 1-5**

My wife Jenny and I don't often disagree. But I've got to tell you of this bad habit she has that causes me great grief. You see, confidentially, just between you and me, she's one of those types who likes to peek at the end of the story before she's even halfway into a book. As far as I'm concerned, if I was to do that, I'd not bother reading on.

So Jenny is very happy given this morning's gospel reading..... from the end of the book of Matthew. Why we have to start the church year, this year of Matthew, at the end of the book is beyond me. But as Jenny has told me often, it's good to know where you're going, it makes the getting there all the more interesting. And I guess theologically that's what is happening with the readings we have in our lectionary this first Sunday of the Church year, this first Sunday in Advent. They are full of hope for the future.

Mind you, the Matthew reading I still find a little strange. What theologies have been constructed on this apocalyptic reading! The Rapture is what it is called, and our fundamentalist brothers and sisters look forward to the day when one will be taken and another left as Jesus returns to take his own home. A fellow named Tim LaHaye has made millions from his 16 "Left Behind" books that are based on our gospel passage. Sadly too much attention has been given to people disappearing in the twinkling of an eye, and not enough attention has been paid to the commands that are given by Jesus in this Matthean reading.

"Keep awake! Be ready!" These are the messages I get out of this morning's gospel. Staying awake to the possibilities of the Christ reappearing in my life and in the life of people all over the world and in all sorts of dreadful situations. Being ready to grasp hold of the opportunities to meet with the Christ when they arise.

That's why I want to spend a few minutes looking at the reading from Isaiah. One of the ways we can prepare ourselves for being ready for the coming of Christ, the day of the Lord, is to take that reading seriously. Isaiah gives us a vivid image of that day. It's an inclusive image. People are streaming to a holy mountain from every corner of the earth. They carry with them weapons of war, and as they climb the mountain, they cast their swords and spears into the furnace.

A blacksmith stands by with a hammer patiently pounding the weapons into tools of cultivation, instruments of life from instruments of death. The din of the forge grows louder, hammers clang on anvil as more and more people arrive, weary of war, drawn by the light, ready for a new day of peace.

What a wonderful picture. But some may claim that this image is just as unrealistic as Matthew's vision of the disappearing woman in the field. In a world weary of war it's difficult

to imagine. Palestinians and Israelis take a few halting steps towards peace, only to have violence flare anew and hopes dashed once more. Hatreds simmer in so many conflicts around our globe based on ethnic, religious and nationalistic differences. When terrorists turned aircraft into weapons, and armed retaliation seems the only solution in a war against terrorism, when North Korea spends money on armaments as its people starve and lobs missiles at civilian targets, and the US brings in a billion dollar aircraft carrier and St. Korean generals vow revenge. How on earth are we to imagine a world at peace?

But in the midst of the violence of this world, the beginning of Advent once more invites us to hope for a different world. We once again light our candles of hope, peace, joy and love that remind us of the salvation given through Jesus Christ.

But it's not enough for us to sit in church lighting our candles, praying for the coming of the Lord. As followers of Christ we are asked to arm ourselves not with swords and spears, but with Christ the light of the world.

And it's happening. Through the week, taken as I was with the image of weapons into plowshares, I went to Google and discovered that this dream of Isaiah had caught on. In Washington a woman named Esther Augsburgberger had constructed a 16 x19 foot high steel plowshares weighing 4 tons consisting of 3000 handguns welded together into the shape of this well-known farm implement. It now stands in the middle of a district that once was notorious for urban gang warfare. A little to the north in Canada there is a totem pole, similarly built totally for hand guns. And in Mozambique a small war torn country in SE Africa has taken to turning weapons into all kinds of art objects as the struggle for peace. The dream is realised by Christian man and women just like you and me.



<http://media.mennoweekly.org/media/uploads/images/2010/07/07/sculpture-close-up-3.jpg>



[http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2328/2068879243\\_e7d3aa1bd1.jpg?v=0](http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2328/2068879243_e7d3aa1bd1.jpg?v=0)

But it's hard. It's not easy to bring peace. For some of you may be a little like me. Occasionally a red mist descends on me and I become irrationally angry. Like the time a few years ago when Jenny and I returned home after a nice night out and were greeted by 4

young men in the middle the road, one of whom was wielding a large piece of wood. We were forced to a halt and the young man with the stick began to hit our car. The red mist descended and I had to be restrained from getting out of the car. Being a peacemaker can be difficult.

In our world, violence is never far away - it's in our households, our communities and certainly in the nations of the world. But it is the violence in ourselves that remains the greatest obstacle to peace in the world.

And at times, it can seem impossible to be a peacemaker.

But Advent invites us to live in hope and not in despair. For if we look to Jesus we see that violence can never have the last word. We are a people of resurrection, a people where weapons can indeed be turned into welcome signs, but only in the resurrecting power of Jesus Christ. That's was the lesson I learned as I prepared to do battle with the young men who dared to attack my car. It's the lesson the leaders of our world need to learn if peace is to break out in our world, and it is a lesson that we are called upon to teach wherever and whenever we can.

The vision given to us on this first Sunday of Advent is a vision for the end of time. "In the last day, when Christ shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal." But for now, we wait expectantly, protecting ourselves not with weapons of war, but with the armour of light, clothing ourselves with Christ.

At our baptism celebrations at Pilgrim we present each newly baptised child of God with a candle. "Receive the light of Christ", we say. The newly baptised person then becomes a part of the community of believers who walk in the light of Christ and who are called to seek paths of peace in a violent world. Be it a baptismal candle or an Advent candle, the flickering light reminds us of Christ, the light of the world. This Advent may we strengthened to always walk in the light of Christ, putting on Christ's armour of light.

Let me finish with a prayer by the African American theologian, Howard Thurman.

**My ego is like a fortress  
I have built its walls  
stone by stone.  
To hold out the invasion  
of the love of God.  
But I have stayed here long  
enough. There is light.  
over the barriers. O my God -  
The darkness of my house forgive  
And overtake my soul.  
I relax the barriers.**

**I abandon all that I think I am,  
All that I hope to be,  
All that I believe that I possess.  
I let go of the past,  
I withdraw my grasping hand  
from the future,  
And in the great silence  
of this moment  
I alertly rest my soul.  
As the seagull lays in the  
wind current,  
So I lay myself into  
the spirit of God.  
My dearest human relationships,  
My most precious dreams,  
I surrender to his care.  
All that I have called my own  
I give back.  
All my favourite things  
Which I would withhold in  
my storehouse  
From his fearful tyranny,  
I let go.  
I give myself  
Unto thee, O my God. AMEN.**

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