

## A Paradox of Peace -

14/8/22 - Yr C 20th Ordinary

Isaiah 5:1-7

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

Luke 12:49-56

---



We often find it helpful to keep in mind a 'big picture view' of the gospel message: from many slightly varying verses, we forge consistent themes. And we can feel at home with those big familiar summarised themes. The readings for today have a big theme of faith that could be unpacked at great length.

However, if we're honest, specific verses sometimes provide apparent contradictions. My experience has been that if we tackle them openly, there is depth & richness to discover in these parts of God's word.

In a different section of Isaiah from today's reading, he prophesied that the Saviour would hold the title "Prince of Peace": and indeed Jesus is an ideal example of peace. He consistently wishes, offers, promises, & bestows peace.

The type of 'peace' that God wishes for us is not just a lack of violence. We can attempt to understand God's peace by exploring the Hebrew concept of **Shalom** – something like flourishing, abundant joyful unfolding of life, with a sense of God walking alongside us.

I'm pretty sure the church teaches that God brings peace on earth.

Except... God doesn't stay in any of the boxes where we would be comfortable to keep God. Let's read it again: "*Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*" But how can this be a true saying from the Prince of Peace? This reading presents a paradox of peace that challenges us to deepen our understanding of the gospel.

This line is not a doubtful interpretation or Peter's misguided enthusiasm. It's our Lord's direct statement. And in case we thought maybe one of the 4 gospel books was corrupted at some point in history, we can find a parallel account of this statement in Matthew [ch10;v34-36].

So how do we deal with this reading that seems to flatly contradict our big theme understanding of a good and loving God, who brings peace?

Being a former language student I thought a different translation might shed light on this ... but after comparing several good translations.. the word here is consistently translated into English as 'peace'.

The New Testament was written straight into Greek, reflecting the understanding of people close to J, and those writings are recognised as filled

with Spirit. So, check the Greek... (yay for the internet...) But the Greek word here [eirene] is the same as at many other mentions of 'peace'... .

So I looked further, into nuances of use, & origin of the word. It seems the expression in street Greek might not always equate 100% to the way Christians in our time tend to hear 'peace' – as **Shalom (reconciled flourishing)**... .

It seems to include a subtle aspect of *unity*; because 'Eirene' appears to come from (or at least include) the idea of 'one' – that is "singleness". So the lack of conflict is because of sharing one view or one understanding.

That kind of idea forms a clear contrast with 'No, I come to divide' – meaning 'to split in two'. It seems possible to me that a shade of meaning we can hear might be called by the English word 'Acquiescence' - conforming to get along.

So perhaps. instead of peace (in sense of acquiescence), Jesus brings a clear divide in views or understanding. Like **Division bell** in some parliaments... when you hear that sound it's time to be counted for your vote.

Note that this passage **doesn't** actually say that the division J brings **causes violence**. The fire that he mentioned just before this is quite likely to be the fire of Pentecost (the holy spirit). Let's not add to scripture.

It's just that even within the closest social group (a family), not everyone will make the same choice. Some cannot and will not give away important core values for a superficial peace.

Indeed our Lord does not bring that kind of peace. Our Christian faith includes a dedicated commitment to right relationships. We trust in the importance of following that principle when it's hard. Because of this, lives that walk in the Way of Jesus can rescue people – personal, not abstract: walking in the Way of Jesus rescues us.

Faith in the Way can rescue from (examples...) alcoholism, grief, manipulation, depression, arrogance, exploitation & abuse... we each insert our own broken-ness in this sentence.

The teachings of J to his wider crowd of disciples leading up to this point have provided enough signs for the people to understand that the Jesus teachings will change the climate of community in Jewish society, because you have to decide yes or no to those teachings.

Perhaps the question for us is not 'why did Jesus teach that following him could be divisive?' but 'does our faith ever lead us to a principled difference from others?' In what ways are we holding back? Where have we acquiesced to something not quite right, to gain peace for ourselves at the price of peace for someone else? The gift of lovingly speaking truth is not a division we need to fear, but a step towards the deep peace for which we long.

As far as possible, let us keep good reputation (e.g. Colossians 4:5-6 ; Romans 12:18) so, it seems to me, the way we live out this division is

important. (e.g. 2 Cor 8:21) I suspect that it should not look like us getting up on our holy high horse and stepping away from those we disagree with (getting the faith a bad name in the process). Instead, we might prefer to allow a division by gently & persistently holding to our values including keeping the relationships right – can we remain open and welcoming & attractive to the other party?

The division should look more like others stepping away from a wholesome relationship that we continue to offer, and less like us pushing away the other party by forcing the issue to a head and closing a gate on them. After all, we follow the Way of a God who is always reaching out to reconcile with us, and who suffers [allows] us to walk away from a right relationship with Him when we sin, because our freedom of conscience is too precious – forced worship is of little value to our God

The word Gospel is a code-word for the good news of Jesus. In this church we're committed to that Gospel, so it makes sense that the 4 gospel books are key to how we understand the rest of scripture.

For me this week, after refusing to make superficial peace by dodging around today's tricky gospel, our second reading suddenly lit up when Paul returns to his often-used metaphor of running the race (his image of Christian life).

There is a connection with the healthy hard earned Peace of the marathon runner –, a runner is divided from those who pursue their own ease and comfort by staying on the sofa; there may be pain, but through the sweat emerges the runner's high [apparently...!]

Perhaps sometimes, Shalom-peace might be won by a marathon effort.

And at the end of the race, as Paul teaches elsewhere, we hope and trust that we may be welcomed into the arms of our creator God, the great mysterious source of all life and being and goodness, who whispers to us: "I AM"

Because we hear the still small voice, and because we dare to trust that there is a whisper of goodness and mystery and love permeating this universe... it shows up in our choice to run the race, seeking a prize: the paradoxical peace of a perfect G-d reconciled forever with flawed humans.

In a few minutes, we're invited to share a sign of peace. When sharing the peace, let's remember that we don't wish, offer, and promise each other a life of acquiescence and ease. In our Lord, we are divided away from that kind of peaceful existence.

Instead, we wish, offer and promise each other a challenging, on-going, hard-earned, deep flourishing in the Spirit.

Peace – shalom – is the kingdom of God that we are called to bring into being now, even while knowing that it will not unfold completely until G-d walks with us again.