

Remembrance Sunday

Isaiah 52.7–12

⁷How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’

⁸Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.

⁹Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

¹¹Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the articles of the Lord’s house.

¹²But you will not leave in haste or go in flight; for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

Romans 8.31–39

³¹What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who then is the one who condemns? No-one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 15.9–17

⁹‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷This is my command: love each other.

John Oswalt, commenting on our reading from Isaiah says:

“As wonderful as creation was, and as true as divine providence is, it is redemption that is earth’s great song. For without redemption, creation and providence are ultimately abortive. The world is caught in the bondage of sin and destruction; creation is fatally marred and providence makes the bondage only bearable. But if it is possible to be delivered from human sin and its effects, then creation may yet see its children and providence may yet lead us to the Father’s house.”

Oswalt here is speaking within the imagery of Isaiah 52. We are in a city, at war with a neighbour. The army has marched out to fight a great battle. Lose, and we are done for good. Win, and we have been saved from the terrible captivity of a cruel enemy. Then — coming over the mountains, hot, sweaty and exhausted, comes a runner. He is joyful. He is the sweetest sight you have seen, because he brings news of peace! How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

The passage is so filled with joy because it was written at a time when Israel was in captivity by Babylon, the terrible enemy. But in the midst of captivity prophetic voices encouraged the people — they said that God had not abandoned them. God still had a victory to win. And God would send a special king, a ‘son’ of

David, their great and famous king, who would win them peace, not just for now, but for all time. This is what Isaiah is announcing in this passage: the prospect that God would send a king to protect his people for all time. To redeem them from the endless destruction and futility of conflict. Christians believe this king did come — he was Jesus Christ and his victory was won in the resurrection from the dead, after his seeming defeat in crucifixion.

It is Remembrance Sunday, and we use this day to remember the self-sacrifice of soldiers who gave their lives in the great wars of the 20th Century, and to express our gladness that we are not at war, and to pray for peace, where there is war.

War is complex. There are frequently layers to the history behind a war that go back hundreds of years. Often each atrocity has a precedent set by the opposing side, so that there is always a reason, always a vengeance to be sought for a past hurt. Such hurts are not trivial, and it can be more than we could bear to hope that such hurt could be forgiven.

In the end, though, peace must rely on people laying down their sense of a right to justice. It depends on millions of people being so eager for peace that they are willing to forgive.

This eagerness for peace that condones forgiving the enemy is not something for politicians or generals alone. It must be fought for within the heart of everyone, successfully.

This is not to deny that justice is important, or should be important. Justice is important. Peace and justice are not enemies of each other — except... that war is complex and within any war there are as many perspectives on justice and peace as there are people with any involvement at all.

War is complex, and the decisions around it are complex. Russia still occupies Ukraine, and Putin is a war criminal, yet NATO countries have not entered the war against Russia. What really is the right course of action? Netanyahu's assaults on Gaza, and now Lebanon and Iran have overstepped notions of 'proportionate response' by a factor of some 20, 30, 40 times. The line 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth' belonged to the Old Testament, Israel's Holy Book — not as a licence for vengeance, but at least as a limitation on vengeance. '*Only* an eye for an eye', is what it really means. But fear is a huge factor, fear of reprisals, fear that this will go on and on, so those at war hope to end the war with a 'killing blow'. There is a problem with this, though: each attempt at such a strike does damage, but also fuels the bitterness, resentment and desire for vengeance of more people. There is no such thing as a killing blow. The 'war to end all wars' unfortunately did nothing of the sort.

And this is what we need redemption from, as we began by talking about. There is, within human nature such an instinct to compete, and to fight, that we might despair of the hope of lasting peace. In a well known discourse of Jesus in Mark chapter 13, Jesus pretty much confirms that conflict is an ongoing reality. But it is also something of which we can be redeemed — not in our own strength, but in God's grace.

So what can we do? It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. We might light our candles by giving to aid agencies, not least the Disasters Emergency Committee, as they negotiate their way in to help those most in need of aid in Gaza and Ukraine.

We can be peacemakers within our small corner of the world — pouring oil on whatever troubled waters may be in and around our lives, and being a beacon of patience and understanding within our communities.

And we can pray. God is at work, even when there are wars everywhere. God is at work, especially when we pray — yearning into the darkness, sometimes doubting God's presence, but 'wasting' our time to tell him how much we want peace, and healing, and wholeness and mercy and justice, and truth and love, and rebuilding. Faith is not a retreat from reality into naivety or wishful thinking. Faith demands we engage with the bruising reality of war, empathise with the victims of war, and reach out in love to make the world a better place, in whatever way we can. We pray in hope that one day ours may be the feet running over the mountains, to share good news of lasting peace.

Amen.

All blessings,

Tim.