

Sermon
22 November 2015
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: 1 Peter 3:8-16

Guild Sunday

Peace. A small 5 letter word, but with a meaning so powerful, it can change the world.

More noticeable in our lives today, unfortunately, are the opposites of peace: terrorism, war, hatred...

Terrorism. Paris. Last Friday. What more do I need to say? Last Friday the 'city of love' was turned into a city of terror. *The opposite of peace.*

War. Syria. Refugees. What more do I need to say? People are literally running away from their homes with only the belongings they can carry on their backs. Risking the elements, choosing starvation and homelessness, over the violence of war. *The opposite of peace.*

Hatred. Countries not talking to each other. Political parties not listening to each other. Brothers not talking or listening to each other. What more do I need to say? Sometimes we can't even get on with our neighbours, with our own families – no wonder the world is in such a state of disharmony! *The opposite of peace.*

Peace. A gift from God. A white dove that wants to build a nest in our hearts. A white dove that wants to change the world through our hands and our mouths, but a white dove that needs to be invited in first, and then nurtured and taken care of, so it can grow and grow and give us wings to fly...

In the first letter we have of the apostle Peter in our New Testament, he gives instruction to a group of Christians who were in the minority in a society where the rest of the people couldn't be the least bit bothered with God or living in peace, respect or harmony with others.

Now doesn't that sound frighteningly familiar?!

He says: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." This brings the Guild theme to mind: Be bold, be strong. But go in peace...

Peter doesn't ask his readers if they would "maybe like to consider" to be bold and strong, like we with our good manners very politely ask other people if we want them to do something today. No! (And here I detect a slight similarity to most South Africans!) He very directly, in no uncertain terms, instructs them (and us), by saying: "All of you, live in harmony with each other; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing... Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it."

In a nutshell. That's how we Christians should lead out lives. Even if we are in the minority, even if we get treated badly for it, even if our good deeds are not received in the same good spirit it was done.

Mahatma Gandhi, who is famous for saying that he liked Christ but didn't like Christians because they are not at all Christ-like, said: "An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind."

Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

Jesus Christ said: "You have heard that it was said: 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you...If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Because, Peter says: "Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed."

Now *that's* a statement I don't think many people who do not believe in God will understand. *Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.* I mean, we don't even always understand it!

But we should try. Because we shouldn't believe in God only because we want to benefit from it, because we want to be blessed or go to heaven one day.

We should believe in God because he made us, he saved us, he loves us, he wants to use us. And if/when during the course of our lives he blesses us and one day we go to heaven, that is just a bonus.

But we cannot say that we are Christians, and then not *live* like Christians! We need to strive for peace, and then pursue it – no matter what!

Peace. More than the absence of war. An act of reaching out, of forgiving and forgetting. A very powerful tool – at our disposal. Anytime, anywhere.

Let's stop deliberately choosing not to use it, and change the world. Step by step, little by little. As individuals we might not be able to change THE WORLD straight away, but we can start by changing *someone's* world...

But before we can live in peace with others, we need to have peace with ourselves. An inner peace that comes from God himself. It's not a co-incidence that the symbol for peace and the symbol for the Holy Spirit are one and the same thing, a white dove.

But what is inner peace? Listen to this story:

There once was a King who offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture of peace. Many artists tried. The King looked at all the pictures, but there were only two he really liked and he had to choose between them.

One picture was of a calm loch. The loch was a perfect mirror, for peaceful towering mountains were all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. All who saw this picture thought that it was a perfect picture of peace.

The other picture had mountains too. But these were rugged and bare. Above was an angry sky from which rain fell, in which lightening played. Down the side of the mountain tumbled a foaming waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all.

But when the King looked, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush a mother bird had built her nest. There, in the midst of the rush of angry water, sat the mother bird on her nest ... perfect peace.

Which picture do you think won the prize?

The King chose the second picture.

Do you know why?

"Because," explained the King, "peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart. That is the real meaning of peace."

And that is a feeling only people who believe in God will be able to truly understand.

Amen