

Peace Be With You

Murray Bridge 11/04/2021

It is good and pleasant when God's people live together in peace, Psalm 133:1

Jesus said: Peace Be With You, John 20: 19,21,26

Peace be with you!

What is this peace that Jesus speaks? And why does the Psalmist suggest it is so good when people live together in peace? We'll explore that today, but first, a slightly different question: when, in this world, do we experience this peace, this living in unity, this working together as a community? It seems to me that so often it occurs after a disaster, or tragedy. Think of the community responses after the bushfires last year, or the floods, or even how people have pulled together during Covid? When a disaster of some sort happens, our natural response is to help, to pull together. In fact, in the Courier, the hills newspaper this week there is an article about how the hills community is now well-placed to recover and move on from the bushfires. The recovery co-ordinator is quoted as saying: "the...community...demonstrated what can be achieved when it worked together"; "I saw...communities pitching in"; "they were helping each other" "a great feeling about...that sense of community". And that's fantastic. But does it have to take a disaster for these sort of things to occur? Can we experience peace and unity when things are going well?

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So, what is this peace? Can it be part of our everyday living?

First up, remember Jesus is steeped in the Jewish Scriptures. When he spoke the word peace, he would have said (in Aramaic): Shalom. Shalom has so much more depth and fullness of meaning than our English word peace. It encompasses wholeness, neighbourliness, good health, wisdom, sharing with one another, - in one sense anything good you can think of, fits under this umbrella. So: Peace be with you, is not just a throwaway line, but this Shalom is all-encompassing; it covers all of life.

Secondly, this is peace beyond understanding. The exact phrase that is often spoken at the end of a sermon: the peace of God which is beyond all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7). Again, not a throwaway

line, but a wish that you would experience Shalom in your life. But it is also beyond understanding because this peace, this Shalom is present in the midst of fear and doubt. This is what John 20 tells us: the disciples were afraid; Thomas wouldn't believe until...Jesus both times stood among them and said: Peace be with you. No recrimination, no words of anger. Simply, gift. And that's liberating for us. We don't have to pursue this peace; although we can, and at times do, through meditation, or prayer, or self-examination, all of which are good to do. But peace is offered freely by Jesus, no strings attached, beyond our understanding.

Next, it is a peace which unlocks doors. I began by asking why don't we experience this peace, this community wellness more often? Regularly? Even always? Perhaps one of the reasons is because we lock doors to feel safe, just as the disciples did. What doors have you locked? How have you locked God, and peace, out of your life? Perhaps it is by trying to control what happens – that's easy to do, and I suspect we all fall into that trap at some stage. Perhaps, at times we feel God has let us down; perhaps God did not respond as we wished or prayed (which might say more about us than God). Perhaps we no longer recognise Jesus for who he really is – the bringer and giver of peace. Our image of God might have been impacted by world events, the current state of politics, or personal tragedy – in which case it might have been more than impacted, perhaps even smashed beyond recognition. But just as Jesus appears through the locked doors to the disciples, so he can break through your locked doors, with no words of condemnation for your fear or anger or doubts or distortions. Simply a word of peace: Shalom

And so, this peace is a peace beyond earthly, or artificial, peace. It is not the "Peace, Peace where there is no peace", which is condemned by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, which the leaders of the community in agreement with the rulers of the day were spruiking. Peace does not come about by economic security no matter what our politicians tell us. Peace does not come about by military dominance even though we (as in Western countries) spend so much more on this than support for those who are struggling. It is interesting that in the Old Testament, military and economic peace is intricately linked with bodily or spiritual health of the individual. In fact, peace of any kind in the Old Testament is wholeness determined and given by God. This is the peace Jesus speaks. The Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) offers peace way beyond promises of earthly peace, which so often seem to result in winners and

losers – one country experiences peace, another destruction and devastation, in so-called earthly peace there is often hurt and distress for one side at least. Where do you look for peace? Trust Jesus' words: Peace be with you. That's what resurrection is about.

Next (point 5 if you're keeping count!), this peace is a blessing, and it comes with blessings (see diagram). These blessings can move in any direction, and even move around. So, peace be with you leads to forgiveness. Forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, perhaps even forgiveness of God. Now I know some of you are immediately going to think: God doesn't need forgiveness. To save you correcting me later I agree. It's true! God does not need forgiveness. But I have noticed over the years in my interactions with people as a pastor and as a counsellor that frequently those carrying the heavy burdens need first to let go of their grudge against God. In other words, to forgive God. Not for God's sake, but for their own. To be able to move on. To regain life. To experience peace. So forgive whoever it is you need to forgive. After all, as the Message version of the bible puts it so well; "if you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them"? Holding on to unforgiveness will rob you of life, rob you of peace. So forgive who you need to and move towards a place of peace. A place of life. Because that is the next blessing peace gives: life. Jesus breathed on them: Receive the Holy Spirit. This recalls the breath of life given when humans were created (Genesis 2:7). It recalls the breath given to the dry bones in Ezekiel 37, so the people of God could have life once again. This peace spoken by Jesus; this breathe breathed by Jesus gives life, life in all its abundance.

This peace is to be shared! As the Father sent me, so I now send you (v21). We are called to live in the peace, the shalom that Jesus gives, and to live it out. It seems to me this can be lived out in so many different ways. It may be your voice, your hands, your feet, your whole body that shares this peace. If you look at your diagram again, the action words around the outside are the fruits (if you like) of living in this peace, enjoying its blessings, practising forgiveness and leading an abundant life. Again they are not static; they can occur in various places. So, we practise compassion, act justly, experience a deep joy, much deeper than human happiness and live in harmony with one another. And the exciting thing and the enabling thing is this can happen in so many different ways and places. When we have shalom in our lives, we can share it in ways that fit with our giftings and abilities, with our time and location. Because as I

said earlier this peace is not limited by locked doors, nor is it limited by geography, or cultural situations.

Psalm 133: 3 says: **There** the Lord gives his blessing of life forever. While “there” in the context of verse 3 of the Psalm refers to Jerusalem, in the wider context of the Psalm and taking into account John 20, “there” refers to where there is peace and unity. And that is where Jesus is present. The resurrected Jesus moves through and beyond physical barriers, but also through and beyond political barriers – neo-liberalism, capitalism, communism, name your –ism; through racial barriers – doesn’t matter what colour your skin is or where you were born; through gender barriers – there is neither male or female in Christ Jesus – we are all given peace; we are all invited to share the good news; through socio-economic barriers – low, middle, high class, you are welcome in God’s kingdom.

So, finally this peace occurs in community. “He (Jesus) is our peace who has made us all one” (Ephesians 2:14). As the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one and live in relationship, we too through Jesus present in our lives and his peace are called into harmony and unity. If, as someone said to me: Peace is the person Jesus present in your life, then peace is also the person Jesus present in the other person. When we recognise that and live in that way, we will truly have Shalom. The peace that comes from Love, that is gifted by Love himself, that is present with Love. This peace brings blessing, grace, life. It is peace beyond our understanding, but completely and freely available to us because of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ongoing presence in each one of us. Peace Be With You. All praise to God.