

# Christmas Brings... Peace

*Rob Yule, 2001*

## The Christian Alternative to Violence (Luke 2:8-15)

Two thousand years ago the angels over Bethlehem announced Jesus' birth with a message of 'peace on earth to everyone who pleases God' (Luke 2:14). With the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, the continuing cycle of suicide bombings and military reprisals in the Middle East, the long-running war in southern Sudan, and many other conflicts around the globe, the angels' message seems far from the reality of current events.

This Christmas message on peace and the Christian alternative to violence was preached at St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 16 December 2001, by Rob Yule, Senior Minister of St Albans and Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The temperature was crisp, around zero, and a weak sun lit the yellow plaster walls and orange tiled rooves. I made my way by tram through the historic Central European city of Prague, accompanied by my friend Pavel Tuma, first post-Communist director of the newly-re-established Czech YMCA, to visit the famous Strahov Monastery and Library. The tram rumbled past Letenska - the large open area where a million people gathered in one of the great demonstrations that brought about the collapse of Communism in Czechoslovakia in November 1989.

Pavel spoke to me of his memories of that momentous time. What struck him, he said, was the 'gentle mood' and sense of togetherness that he experienced in that vast crowd. People, he said, were incredibly tender and courteous to one another, as they waited patiently for buses, trams and trains to demonstrations. The Communist authorities refused to schedule extra services for an event targeted at them. But there was no pushing or shoving for the limited public transport.

Only on three occasions in his life, Pavel Tuma told me, had he experienced such togetherness. One was in 1945, at the end of the Second World War; another was in 1968 during the Prague Spring; and the third was in November 1989 during the Velvet Revolution that brought down communism, so-called because of its gentleness and absence of violence.

'Peace' sounds like a fragile, insubstantial quality. But it is real. It is not just the absence of discord. It is a state of bliss, both personal and social; an elevated state of being which we are rarely caught up in. There is something almost miraculous, God-given, about it, which awakens in us a longing for its full realisation. 'Come and set up your kingdom,' Jesus told us to pray to God, 'so that everyone on earth will obey you, as you are obeyed in heaven' (Matthew 6:10).

### 1. Personal Peace

I recall the first time I was anointed with oil. It was during one of the darkest times in my ministry. As a new minister of a church that was being torn apart by a church split, suffering from a viral 'flu' that never seemed to get better, I did a rather un-Protestant thing. I went to see a Catholic monk, Ces Denehey, the grand old man of the Catholic charismatic renewal movement in Christchurch, at the Redemptorist Monastery at New Brighton. He anointed me for 'peace', on my forehead, and on my palms. Something happened as a result. I experienced a deep inner calm and sense of wellbeing. My pain and striving ceased. The word 'peace' was no longer a concept, but a reality.

A central theme of Billy Graham's evangelistic preaching has been 'peace with God.' It comes from Romans 5:1, 'By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ, we live at peace with God.' The death of Jesus, God's Son, on the cross, means that the enmity between ourselves and God because of our wrongdoing has been overcome. Jesus has paid the price for our wrongs. He has satisfied God's justice. His death has ended the hostility. By believing in him, our sins can be forgiven, our guilt taken away, our anger and rebellion removed. Through Jesus Christ we can experience peace with God.

This week a prayer to begin the day was sent to me by a member of the Secular Franciscan Order - the lay, non-monastic branch of the Franciscans - who had no idea that I was due to preach on peace this Sunday. It was written by St Francis of Assisi:

*Holy Spirit of God,  
grant that I might meet the coming day with spiritual tranquillity.*

*Grant that in all things I may rely upon your holy will.  
In each hour of the day, reveal your will to me.*

*Whatever news may reach me this day,  
teach me to accept it with a calm soul,  
knowing that all is subject to your holy will.*

*Direct my thoughts and feelings in all my words and actions.  
In all unexpected occurrences,  
do not let me forget that all is your gift.*

*Grant that I may deal firmly and wisely  
with every member of my family and all who are in my care,  
neither embarrassing nor saddening anyone.*

*Give me the strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day  
with all that it shall bring.*

*Direct my will and teach me to pray,  
to believe, to hope, to be patient, to forgive, and to love.  
Amen.*

## **2. Relational Peace**

Jesus Christ can make peace between people who are estranged, arguing, fighting, at war with one another. Wherever the Christian message spreads, it makes angry people calm, violent people compassionate, warlike people peaceable.

The early fourth century theologian Athanasias describes how the Gospel calmed the war-like barbarians of his day. 'When they hear the teaching of Christ, they immediately turn from war to farming, and instead of arming their hands with swords they stretch them out in prayer. . . . And what is most amazing is that they even scorn death and become martyrs of Christ.' (*On the Incarnation*, §52). In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin, describing his explorations in the South Pacific in *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839), said that travellers to these parts would be very grateful to discover that the missionaries had gotten here first. It was the message of Christ that turned savage cannibals into noble ambassadors of the Prince of Peace.

Jesus can bring peace to fractious marriages, estranged flatmates, backbiting workplaces, jealousy-ridden offices, divided communities. For some years I have been predicting that we will begin to see a turning away from divorce, with divorced couples choosing to remarry their former partner. A year ago, on my first regional visit as Presbyterian Moderator, to Taranaki, I was privileged to ordain a woman to limited local ministry in a New Plymouth church. She and her divorced husband had not long returned to each other and remarried, and he and her family were present in the church to witness her ordination. On a recent visit to North Otago, I read of a similar case in the local newspapers. Jesus makes peace, and restores broken relationships.

## **3. International Peace**

There are many instances of the Gospel of peace transforming places broken by war and civil conflict. The peace agreement reached a couple of years ago in Bougainville was brokered by a local church pastor whom I met at a Council for World Mission meeting in Auckland last year.

The crusades are a shameful blight in the history of Christianity. But few know that at the height of the Crusades, in 1219, St Francis of Assisi undertook a visit, on his own initiative, to the Middle East. Against everyone's advice, and at great personal risk, he travelled to Egypt, personally visited the Sultan, and endeavoured to reconcile the warring Christian and Muslim nations of that time. His visit made a deep impression on the Sultan, who gave him permission to visit the holy places in Palestine on his return home.

Alexander I was Tsar of Russia at the time of Napoleon's 1812 campaign across the north European plain deep into Russia. By early 1814, through remarkable sacrifice and heroism, the Russians had driven the French all the way back from Moscow to Paris.

Tsar Alexander was a devout believer who attributed Russia's deliverance to the mercy of God. Instead of taking vengeance on the French, he publicly celebrated the magnificent Russian Orthodox Easter night service, with its message of forgiveness and reconciliation. 'Let us embrace one another, and forgive one another our offences, for Christ is risen from the dead!' In this way he publicly forgave the French people for their act of war against his nation. (Nicholas Arseniev, *Russian Piety* [London, Faith Press, 1964], p. 96).

This inspired gesture led directly to the formation of the 'Holy Alliance', aimed at bringing peace based on Christian love to the monarchs and peoples of Europe. Consequently, in contrast to the twentieth century, the century between 1815 and 1914 - as Roland Bainton says in *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1961, pp. 190-91) - was 'a century of comparative peace . . . in which the peace movement first organised itself on an international scale.'

## Peace Making

A clever billboard recently appeared on the streets of Wellington, New Zealand's capital city:

'Born Wellington, 1964. Died Rome, 192 BC.'

It was a reference to Russell Crowe, New Zealand-born actor who played the role of Emperor Commodus in the movie *Gladiator*. Gladiatorial contests, where men - and sometimes women and dwarfs - fought each other to the death, were a particularly depraved kind of blood-sport in the Roman world. But how many of you know how gladiatorial contests ceased? Telemachus, an orthodox Christian, grew so concerned in conscience about the blood-letting and sadism, that on 1 January 391 he went out into the centre of an arena during a contest, to separate the combatants. Angry that he was spoiling their fun, the spectators set upon him and killed him. His death caused such revulsion that it led Emperor Honorius to abolish gladiatorial contests, and they were never staged again.

I am an unfashionable curiosity - a pacifist who advocates compulsory military training. I think it would benefit New Zealanders if we all had to train together to defend this country - both from external aggression (which our remoteness makes unlikely) and from civil disasters (which our geography makes us especially prone to). This would give many unskilled underclass New Zealanders basic survival skills and training in trades. It would mean we had an active military able to undertake more international peace-keeping missions and conflict resolution roles than we do at present. New Zealand has a great opportunity to do this, because most New Zealanders are peace-loving, we're internationally respected, and we're not a threat to anybody.

## Christian Pacifism

My standpoint is based on the pacifism of Jesus and of the early church. Right down till the time when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christians were consistently pacifist. Some Christians were members of the Roman armies, but in non-combatant or peace-keeping roles, and left the ranks or refused to fight in the event of war. In modern terms, they distinguished between police duties and war.

The early Christians were not prepared to take life. The apologist Tertullian said that they would rather be killed than kill (*On Idolatry*, § 37). Tertullian had been converted toward the end of the second century by witnessing a martyrdom. The pacifism of the early Christians is summed up in his famous saying: 'How shall the Christian wage war . . . without the sword which the Lord has taken away? For . . . the Lord in disarming Peter, ungirded every soldier' (*On Idolatry*, § 19, cf. Matthew 26:52).

In my previous church in Hornby, Christchurch, were a number of people whose outlook had been formed by the Richmond Mission. The founders of this independent faith mission, David and Florence Smith, did a great deal of prison visiting, and during the Second World War came in contact with a number of conscientious objectors, many of whom suffered ostracism and hardship because of their beliefs. Together with some older conscientious objectors in their fellowship from the First World War, this strengthened their resolve that a Christian should not take life.

One of my Hornby elders, Norman McCallister, had been a member of the Richmond Mission. He was a conscientious objector, on Christian grounds, during the Second World War. The military tribunal which heard his appeal made Norman give all his pay to a government department, and he was only given back a soldier's allowance to live on, though of course he didn't get a soldier's meals and accommodation. A meek man, he was roughly treated by workmates at Archibald's Furniture factory, where he was required to work. (Mary Petersen, *To the Glory of God . . . The History of the Richmond Mission, Christchurch, 1911-1984* [Christchurch, North Avon Baptist Church, 1995], pp. 29-30). A fine cabinet-maker, Norman later made the bookshelf that holds our *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

### **Peace on Earth**

I conclude this message by reading from this year's Christmas message to member churches of the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand:

The Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand sends greetings and prayers of good will and unity to all member and non-member Churches at Christmas.

In the light of current events, the cry for peace that heralded Jesus' birth is as compelling as ever. Churches around the world have been one in asking that Christ's alternative to violence and destruction be honoured without in any way diminishing the evil of terrorism. Recent events have given the nations an opportunity to re-examine the futility of traditional warfare and to focus on alternative ways of negotiating just and peaceful solutions.

The clear message of Christ's birth and life is never to resist evil with evil. The season of his nativity calls for the full exploration of diplomatic and legal solutions for immediate crises. It also calls for a commitment to work on the long term underlying injustices and inequalities that affluent and powerful nations inevitably inflict on the poor nations.

Let us commit ourselves to this great task, in the prayer for peace by St Francis of Assisi:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
And where there is sadness, joy.*