

Cross-Words: Government, Peace
Isaiah 9:2-7
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2016

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Christmas is the time when most people think about peace and joy. So, it seems natural to talk about a perfect government that would bring peace. However, we need the help of the Holy Spirit to understand what true peace is, where true peace comes from, and what it means to be peacemakers in this world.

The story is told of a knight who was returning to his castle at twilight. He was a mess. His armor was dented, his helmet was askew, his face was bloody, and his horse was limping. The lord of the castle saw him coming and went out to meet him. He asked, "What hath befallen you, sir knight?" Straightening himself as best he could, the knight replied, "Sire, I have been laboring in your service, robbing and pillaging your enemies to the west." "You have been doing what?" cried the startled nobleman. "But I haven't any enemies to the west!" "Oh!" said the knight. After a pause he added, "Well, methinks you do now."

Sounds like the real world, doesn't it? Just when everything seems to be running along smoothly, someone or some group comes along and sends everything back to square one. Today's newspapers and television reports seem to agree with something the prophet Jeremiah said: *We hoped for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing but there is only terror* (Jer 14:19 NIV).

How ironic it is to sit comfortably in our beautiful church singing about peace on earth while the world is at war. Yet the promise of Christmas is peace. A peace which transcends the conflicts raging in the world, a deeper peace, an eternal peace.

Even through the nations of the world might be at war, God offers us peace. Our peace comes in the person of Jesus Christ, the Babe of Bethlehem. This is the same Jesus who told his disciples: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid* (Jn 14:27 NIV).

We need the Holy Spirit to give us a clear understanding of what true peace is. That way, not only will we live at peace no matter what the world around us looks like, we will also become peacemakers. What a privilege to receive and pass on *the peace of God, which transcends all understanding* (Philipp 4:7 NIV).

At first glance, our text would seem to be speaking about political peace: *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever* (Is 9:7 NIV).

Yet we must remember that in the Bible, peace almost always has a spiritual dimension. The most important peace is peace with God. And the government that brings that peace to our lives, is the government God ushered in through the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ.

Since there never has been lasting peace in the world, some cynics may say that God has not kept his promise. Political peace is hard to come by, and some generations have never known it. Many people expect God to put an end to all wars and earthly conflicts. Some anticipate a millennium, one thousand years of literal peace on earth. Others put bumper stickers on their cars saying, "Coexist" or "Visualize World Peace," as if wishing for peace will somehow make it a reality. Yet no society or government has ever succeeded in finding the answer to this yearning for worldly peace.

After a Christmas Eve candlelight service, a bitter man once remarked, "How can you sing about Jesus Christ the way you do? Do you really believe the song of the angels, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men?* (Lk 2:14 NKJV). Jesus is no Prince of Peace. If he was, there really would be peace on earth!"

Some of us may be tempted to echo that cynic's words at one time or another. If so, it's because we have a misunderstanding about the promise of God. We have set our sights too low, limiting our understanding of peace to the worldly, the material, and the physical.

The peace that comes with the birth of the Christ Child is a peace that transcends, it overcomes the problems of this world. It's an eternal, everlasting peace. That's what our text means when it says: *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.*

Paul explained the key to true peace in his letter to the Ephesians. Paul describes peace between people as a by-product of having peace with God: *For [Jesus Christ] is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit* (Eph 2:14-18 NIV).

The chaos and stress of today are not caused by a God who is unwilling to put an end to war. They are symptoms of a deep-seated sin. Our sinful nature separates us from the loving and caring God who desires unity. Peace on man's terms will never come to this earth. But peace on God's terms has already come with the birth of the Christ Child.

In his book *Touch of the Masters Hand*, Charles Allen relates the legend about a man stuck in quicksand. A number of famous religious men stopped to see him wallowing in the muck. The first was Confucius who, upon seeing the man in trouble, announced, "Here is evidence that men should stay out of such places." Next, Buddha wandered by and warned, "Let that be a lesson to the rest of the world." Then Mohammed observed the man's plight and proclaimed, "Alas, it is the will of Allah." To which a Hindu man added, "Cheer up, my friend. You will return to earth in another form." Finally, Jesus Christ sees the man sinking slowly. Jesus reaches out, takes hold of him, and says, "I will pull you out!"

It is Jesus Christ not Confucius, Buddha, or Mohammed who fulfills the first part of Isaiah 9:2 by bringing his people out of darkness into light. Jesus himself is *the Light of the world* (Jn 8:12). It is Jesus alone who breaks the powers of darkness, who pulls us up out of the quicksand of our sin, and who saves us eternally.

The joy and rejoicing of verse three come because Jesus has won the battle. He has achieved the victory. There is no more hostility between God and man. Jesus has given us peace. And that peace comes in the government Jesus brings; a government based on justice and righteousness.

Yes, chaos, corruption, and crime continue for now in the world. In fact, Scripture tells us that things are going to get worse before they get better. Yes, there will be bloodshed and mayhem to the end of time. The stillness of "Silent Night, Holy Night" will sooner or later be shattered by pain and loss.

However, that doesn't change the fact that Jesus is still the Prince of Peace! What the world cannot give us has been accomplished by Jesus, our Savior and Lord. What's more, Jesus has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That's why, as the children of God, we are called peacemakers (Mt 5:9). We have received God's peace for the purpose of becoming ambassadors who spread peace and justice throughout the world.

We are challenged to "keep the peace" and to sincerely work for peace among our loved ones. We witness to the world about God's welfare program for all people. Having peace means being at peace. And the peace we have received is meant to be translated into acts of love and reconciliation as Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5).

C. S. Lewis was right when he said, "nothing in this world satisfies me because I was made for another world." The spiritual satisfaction that is ours, in knowing God's forgiveness in Christ, is precisely the reason for us to announce with the angels: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!* (Lk 2:14 NKJV). One of the fruits of

the Spirit we have is peace (Gal 5:22).

When World War 1 ended for the people of the city of Mons, Belgium, on November 11, 1918, their cry echoed down the streets: "Hang out your flags!" Freedom was theirs again. As we leave the solitude of this sanctuary, we should be crying, "Hang out your Christian flags! Peace is ours in Jesus!"

The Christ Child is born for our temporal and eternal welfare. I pray he will bring his peace into our hearts and homes, enabling us to be peacemakers for the sake of his holy name. And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.