

Zoom service Letchworth on 20th December 2020 at 10.45

Call to worship:

'A child has been born for us. We have been given a son who will be our ruler.

His names will be: Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace.'

Hymn StF 176: Like a candle flame

[The Candle Song - Graham Kendrick - Lyric Video - YouTube](#)

As our young people leave us and go into their breakout room, we pray God's blessing on them and those who lead them. May we all know that God is with us today and always? Amen

Prayer of Praise:

Praise God in the highest heaven! Peace on earth and loving mercy towards all people.

Almighty God, like the angels we want to lift our voices to praise you, for you deserve all the praise we can offer.

You brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, and there in that busy place you were present, doing something wonderful and unexpected.

You still work in ordinary places and situations to do extraordinary things.

You sent Jesus to be born as a baby, to be brought up in a human family.

You still use ordinary people to serve you and work for you.

You gave the message to the shepherds, working men, often looked down on by others

You still entrust ordinary people like us with the good news of Jesus.

Praise God in the highest heaven! Peace on earth and loving mercy towards all people.

Now and forever. Amen.

We pray the prayer that Jesus gave us:

Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your Name,

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,

Now and forever. Amen.

Introduction:

I wonder if you have received any Christmas cards with the word 'Peace' on them. Have you sent any Christmas cards with 'Peace' on them? I suspect the answer to both those questions for most of us is 'yes'.

Just a few more questions:

Are you a peaceful person? In other words are you filled with peace? Or not? Do you have an inner peace?

Always or sometimes?

Do you seek peace in your relationships with others?

Do you pray for peace in the world?

Over 700 years before Jesus, the Prince of Peace was born, the prophet Isaiah had a vision of God's universal peace which we are now going to hear.

Bible Reading: Isaiah 2: 2-4 (NIVUK)

²In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established

as the highest of the mountains;

it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.
³ Many peoples will come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.'
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
⁴ He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war any more.

Reflection 1):

Isaiah's vision of God's universal peace is a powerful Advent message, which begins with God's commitment to a new world. Isaiah conveys this through the radical creation imagery in which the mountain of God is pictured as reforming the shape and features of the world, as it emerges as the highest of all mountains.

Isaiah is not simply giving us a snapshot of the end-time but is also telling us that his picture of the end will endure. One day God will recreate this world and then all will live in peace by the light of God.

But Advent is not simply about the future, for aspects of this new world are already taking place. We celebrate a past incarnation that provides light for the present. Peace on earth has already come 2000 years ago with the birth of Jesus. But it has not fully come. It has only come as a glimpse of what can be. In Jesus, God brought heaven and earth together; in his second coming, the joining together will be complete. That is the Advent hope and so we dream Isaiah's dream again. We celebrate Jesus' first coming and use that to fuel our hope for his second coming and to strengthen us to work for signs of his kingdom in the present.

We live today in the reality of what he has showed us, and what he has promised. We know that he has come into this world as Jesus and has sent his Holy Spirit to be with us now and we believe he will come again. When he comes, may he find us hard at work hammering our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into pruning hooks, playing our part in bringing peace and justice on earth?

When Jesus first came to this earth as a baby, the angels' message to the shepherds was also one of peace as we will hear now.

Luke 2: 8-14 (NIVUK)

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

Hymn CMP 713: 'Tonight' or 'Glory to God'

[Tonight \(Glory to God\) Lyric Video by Graham Kendrick from The Gift - YouTube](#)

Reflection 2):

They smelt like sheep, they were unshaven, dirty, and wearing their working clothes, yet the despised shepherds of Judea were the only people who heard the heavenly chorus:

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.’

Even though shepherds were economically important at the time of Jesus, and some of the great figures of Israel’s past like Moses and David, had been shepherds, they had very low social status. In fact, as largely nomadic people, they would have been on the edge of their communities. People were expected to attend the temple on a regular basis and observe all the cleansing rituals, but because of the demands of their job, shepherds would have found this impossible.

I suppose, the status of the shepherds could be likened to bin men today. Modern societies could not function without them, but such workers are rarely accorded any great social status with the essential job they do for the many.

But God chose the lowly shepherds to be the first recipients of the greatest tidings ever revealed to mankind. A child has been born who is Saviour, Messiah, and Lord. A redeemer has been given to Israel, in the line of David – in David’s very own town. A human child born in obscurity is at the same time a child sent from God, with angelic fanfare, to glorify God and to bring God’s peace.

Hymn StF 206: ‘It was on a starry night’.

[It was on a Starry Night - YouTube](#)

Reflection 3):

It was proclaimed by the angels and expected by the prophets – Jesus’ birth would bring peace on earth. But did it?

As we look at our world today, in the middle of a pandemic, peace seems sadly lacking. People are full of worry, uncertainty and anxiety. Relationships are strained and full of stress. The world is full of turmoil, conflict and wars. Two thousand years down the line from the angels declaring peace on earth, we still find it hard to locate the peace they revealed to the shepherds, in the world today.

But we tend to forget that Jesus was born into a world of turmoil and oppression. In our telling of the nativity story, we often miss out Jesus’ family fleeing into Egypt to escape from Herod’s tyranny. Throughout his life Jesus lived under a ruthless colonial power but in his ministry he placed huge emphasis on peace. Ultimately, of course he was put to death by the Roman authorities. And yet by dying on the Cross for us he took our sins upon himself, so we could be forgiven and we could be restored to a right relationship of peace with God.

When Jesus bids farewell to his disciples, the message he chooses to leave with them is one of peace:

‘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.’

The deep inner peace that Jesus gives cannot be found outside a relationship with him. It goes beyond not being in conflict. It is in essence a wholeness; it is how things are meant to be. It enables us to look at others through God’s eyes; it’s the presence of Jesus within us.

But I also think that in his farewell message, Jesus meant that he left them and us with the task of making peace in the world and in our relationships, of giving and forgiving, of repairing and making good.

You see, if Jesus is the Prince of Peace, then we, as followers of Jesus are subjects of that peace and that isn’t something that we can just feel smug about but should be actively working for peace on earth.

We may feel that we can do very little, especially when we think of the seemingly endless wars in many parts of the world. So many people live amidst conflict, and for some they have known nothing else. Even so we can play our part in the call for justice through prayer and actively supporting policies and initiatives for peace.

We can start in our relationships with others, especially in the way we think about and treat those who are different from ourselves. That’s where we need to ask Jesus, the Prince of Peace to break down barriers, to reconcile and to restore peace to our damaged relationships.

The story is told of a wise old Rabbi who instructed his students by asking questions. He asked, 'How can a person tell when the darkness ends and the day begins?' After thinking for a moment, one student replied, 'It is when there is enough light to see an animal in the distance and be able to tell if it is a sheep or a goat.' Another ventured, 'It is when there is enough light to see a tree, and tell if it is a fig or an olive.'

The old Rabbi gently said, 'No. It is when you can look into a man's face and recognise him as your brother. For if you cannot recognise in another's face the face of your brother, the darkness has not yet begun to lift, and the light has not yet come.'

As Christmas approaches and beyond, may we be people of light in a dark world and people of peace in a troubled world. And may the words of promise the angels proclaimed to the shepherds ring in our ears as we worship and adore Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Prayer of confession:

Lord, we confess that we are part of the tension and injustice of the world.

Forgive our human selfishness, to which we contribute,

Heal the resentment between people, of which we are a part,

Break down the barriers between people which with our prejudices we erect,

And come into the world's conflicts, in which we share by being human.

Take our unworthiness and sorrow and use them in your great work of healing and restoring humanity and bringing peace on earth.

Amen.

Hymn StF 205: It came upon a midnight clear

Music only from <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/19745/christmas-cd-01-12-20.mp3>

Prayers of intercession:

We pray for peace in our world: that all people may live free from violence, in safety and security, and with hope for the future.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all people who are working to build peace in their communities: that they may inspire others by their example and be strengthened to carry on, even in the hardest times.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all people who have been affected by violence as they rebuild their lives: that they may find it in their hearts to move forwards in peace and forgiveness.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lastly we pray for those for whom Christmas will be filled with sadness. We pray for all those who will spend Christmas, in sickness, either at home or in hospital; for those mourning the loss of a loved one and for those separated from their family and friends.

May they all know the peace of your presence within them?

We pray particularly today for these people in our church community:

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord, may Christmas this year be good news for millions of your anxious and troubled people in the world. May the angels sing for them? May Christ be born in them? May your love and peace come home to them? Amen.

Hymn StF 706: Longing for light we wait in darkness

[Christ Be Our Light - YouTube](#)

Closing Prayer & Blessing:

As Christmas draws near, may peace and light continue with us; the peace and light that Jesus gives to the world.

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.