

lion&lamb



Content

Blessed are the Peacemakers

Ten years ago themes like peace, justice and reconciliation were treated with suspicion as something extraneous to the gospel. In many of our churches and study groups the fear of raising these issues was so paralysing that even when atrocity rattled the windows of complacency our continuing neglect seemed to know no shame.

With the publication of *For God and His Glory Alone* a new confidence and consciousness found their way into the hearts and homes of many of us. It was a confidence born of revelation and repentance, and authorised by a sincere attempt to read the biblical text with integrity. There was a new consciousness that to make peace, do justice, and create hope in our broken country was not some woolly humanist agenda, but a biblical imperative from a God who loves his world. And there was also a new courage that was willing to countenance the holy insanity of learning to love our enemies and to risk engagement with those who we historically feared.

Ten years later as this issue of *Lion & Lamb* explores the theme of Peacemaking it seems appropriate to revisit what for many was a 'kairos' document and to read again the short but poignant section on Peace that continues to find resonance in the hearts of many.

"Having found peace with God and with each other, followers of Jesus are, by definition, peacemakers. The impetus for peacemaking lies in the doctrine of God and in our experience of his grace.

We are to live at peace with all people as far as it depends on us. This implies and demands firstly the rejection of violence, whether in the form of action, word or attitude, in all our relationships in the community. It also requires the embracing of actions, words and attitudes, which constructively contribute to peace. In following this way, we must not associate ourselves with the use or threat of violence and paramilitary force, even under the guise of self defence."

Derek Poole (Editor)

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Lion & Lamb

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Comment

"The Radical, Vulnerable, Risk-Taking Jesus"

The words of Jesus are rightly of huge significance to all who attempt to follow him. Highlighted in red or green, depending on which translation you read, his words offer stop and go signs on our journey towards him.

There is a poetic quality about 'Blessed are the peacemakers'. It rolls off the tongue with consummate ease. Yet today, as no doubt it has always been, these words are much easier to say than they are to live. It occurs to me that we in the Christian community are quick to utter these words, as we attempt to reinforce the need for a non-violent solution to the conflict in our land.

Whilst peacemaking is a non-negotiable element of our faith, and the need for peacemakers remains acute, I believe that the Christian community has to examine closely the type of model it presents. Before calling on the wider community to invest in peacemaking, should we not examine the forest of timber in our own eyes with regard to how we relate or don't relate with other denominations? It is true that some steps have been taken in this area and that is to be applauded, but will we continue to do so in the difficult days which no doubt lie ahead? Will we in the church continue to speak up and speak out, even when it makes us unpopular and criticised within our own communities?

By
Mark Houston

Consider the four-cornered sheet containing all kinds of everything that was laid out before Peter during his dream (Acts 10). God was preparing him for a new experience, the conversion of a group of Gentiles. Prior to that moment he had thought of Gentiles as unclean. Is there a signpost here for the evangelical community, a signpost we have failed to notice in the past?

Perhaps this passage creates a precedent for us to follow, an encouragement to step out of our traditional routes and no-go areas, and engage in a new openness. An increase in prayerful open dialogue, even if eventual agreement proves elusive, may sow seeds of friendship, respect and openness to diversity. Future generations might then be better equipped to reap the benefits.

History appears to present 'kairos' moments that the church would do well to utilise, since they often take generations to reappear. Will we in the light of this 'refuse to call anything impure that God has made clean'? (Acts 10:15)

Fortunately for us, Peter's experience changed his theology and caused a paradigm shift in his subsequent mission. Would we acknowledge that God is neither on one side nor the other, and accept as Peter did that 'God does not show favouritism but accepts men (and women) from every nation who fear Him and do what is right'? (Acts 10:34)

When Jesus lived out peacemaking the Samaritan woman was transformed. Her experience resulted in the transformation of her community which had until that moment, along with the Jews, not been able to see the wood for the trees.

The radical, vulnerable, risk-taking Jesus engaged with a woman whose gender rendered her disposable, whose lifestyle rendered her undesirable, and whose faith rendered her the 'other sort'.

Would we? Could we? As always there appear to be more questions than answers.

Mark Houston is the Pastor of City Church, a new church working in the Lower Ormeau / Holy Land area of Belfast with a particular emphasis on peace and reconciliation. He is a member of the ECONI Steering Group.

From the Director

Events, both recent and those still to confront us, can leave no one in any doubt that peacemaking is difficult. The 'Good Friday' Agreement came about on a day on which Christians recall the true cost of making peace in a sinful and rebellious world.

In the act of making peace with us God paid the price. While we were still his enemies, at war with him and without any declaration on our part to end hostilities, God loved us and sent his son to die for us. Jesus came to this world not to condemn but to save.

This he did by becoming one of us, sharing in our humanity and, while without sin, identifying with our sinfulness, taking our place in satisfying the justice of a holy God.

When Jesus says *love your enemies*, he knows precisely what he is asking of us. When Jesus declares *blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God*, he is mindful of the journey outside the camp he is inviting us to share with him. When we choose to follow this Jesus his way of love and peace is a costly commitment to a new spiritual order.

For Christians our defining identity in the search for peace is our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. The good news of Jesus is the good news of the rule of God in our lives. The values of this world are turned upside down. We remain resident aliens in this world and our Christian engagement with society is not to make western liberal democracy or any other system work better, but to demonstrate a new way of being.

At this moment in our community it is important that we respond with this spiritual perspective to a process and document which bear both human inspiration and human frailty.

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This is the only way that we can be open to the best the agreement offers and address the legitimate concerns it presents.

From God's perspective we are a community marred by violence and murder, death and destruction, hatred and bigotry. Our only call to God is for mercy. Many have been wounded and scarred by injury and loss. Great

evil has been done.

There is legitimate hurt, pain and anger as a result. Yet there also lurks bitterness, vengeance and the desire for victory.

These are difficult issues to face. It is a fact of our fallen world that many of the great injustices must be left to the final day of reckoning. Paul exhorts us to leave vengeance to God.

And on this great day who can stand? For Jesus tells us that it is not only the murderer and adulterer who are guilty but also the one who is angry and lustful in heart. Few of us have resorted to violence, but we have allowed ourselves to harbour a sectarian spirit and enmity towards our neighbour.

Biblical faith responds to the ambiguity of sinful human existence with grace and compassion. God's unmerited favour is the only basis any of us have for a new start. God's unlimited love, the only hope for a future life in which the scars can begin to heal.

Is this not our problem? We want those who have done wrong to earn what can only be freely received - forgiveness. We are afraid of the demand to change placed on us when we learn to love our neighbour and enemy as God loves us.

Only hearts softened by such grace and love have the real capacity to weep with all those who weep and mourn with all those who mourn for their great loss in our tragic conflict.

David Porter is the Director of ECONI.

P eacemaking

*requires the
courage to
overcome
our fears*

*by
Arthur
Chapman*

'Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.'

The principle of maintaining and fostering peace is one which is considered an essential element of the Christian message, especially in our present age. No one would deny its validity, but in order to bring it about positive action needs to be taken. It tends to be accepted as a fine ideal rather than an imperative which needs to be applied to every situation and above all in circumstances where established social loyalties are likely to be disturbed. Peace between men will not come automatically but requires effort, hence our Lord's exhortation to be peacemakers. One of our many sins of omission lies in this sphere.

What are the factors which blunt our resolve and cause us to miss opportunities to implement this programme? They all seem to be related to fear - fears associated with our Christian faith and particularly our Christian fellowship. They can be identified as follows:

Fear of weakening our commitment to individual devotion and personal salvation.

Fear of contamination with evil - the belief that politics is a dirty game and that we should keep ourselves unspotted from 'the world'.

Fear of disloyalty to the group of which we are a part.

Fear of isolation and misunderstanding both from friends and those we seek to contact.

Fear of over-emphasis and dependence on an exclusively social gospel.

A S

individuals we have loyalty to the social, political, religious and cultural groups of which we form a part. As Christians we have also loyalty to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Problems arise when these dual loyalties conflict. In the pre-Constantine era there was no convergence of interests between Church and State. The supreme allegiance for the Christian was to Christ, and basic responsibilities only were to be discharged to the civil authorities.

Thus Cyprian, writing about 252 A D describes the Church as a community of peacemaking:

'For God commands us to be peacemakers, and in agreement, and of one mind in his house; and such as he makes us by a second birth, such he wishes us when new-born to continue, that we who have begun to be sons of God may abide in God's peace, and that, having one spirit, we should also have one heart and one mind.'

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, writing in the following century, states:

'It is the essence of piety not to force, but to persuade, in imitation of our Lord, who forced no one, but left it to the will of the individual to follow him... But the devil, because he has nothing of truth, uses knocks and axes, to break up the doors of such as receive him. But our Saviour is meek, teaching the truth.... and enters when he is opened to, and retires if they delay, and will not open unto him; because it is not with swords, nor darts, nor soldiers, nor armour, that truth is to be declared, but with persuasion and counsel.'

With the establishment of Christianity as a state religion believers were induced more and more into conforming to the political demands of civil government and to supporting actions which were in conflict with the principles of the gospel. Thus the Crusades were promoted and justified - a tragedy which in subsequent years has caused Islam to view the Christian message with the utmost hostility and mistrust. With

the Reformation individual rulers adopted particular religious positions and for the sake of political stability sought to impose uniformity of belief on all their subjects. Sadly wars of religion were fought to convert forcibly those of contrary views to the prevailing system of religious belief and practice. Efforts were made to justify armed conflict in certain circumstances by the theory of a 'Just War'.

Certain groups, however, such as the Mennonites and Quakers, who had no pretensions to political jurisdiction over national communities, shunned this use of force. In the turbulent times of 1660 the Society of Friends in England presented to Charles II their reasons for not bearing arms, as set out below. They based their stand on the biblical imperative to love one's enemies and promote the cause of peace, which was not to gainsay any political expediency.

'We utterly deny all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatever: this is our testimony to the whole world. The Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from anything as evil, and again to move unto it. We certainly know, and testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ, which leads into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.'

At the time of the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland all Quakers were called upon to destroy guns or other implements in their homes which might serve as weapons. This was done to decommission anything which might be used for violent purposes and at the same time to proclaim publicly the refusal of Friends to take sides but to place their trust for protection and safety in God alone. Thomas Wakefield, who lived at Moyallon, near Portadown, in a symbolic gesture witnessed by Friends and the general public alike, went

The promise to peacemakers is that they will be called the children of God

to the bridge over the River Bann and there destroyed his prized fowling-piece, subsequently dropping it into the river.

Although the 1798 Rebellion claimed the lives of some 30,000 people and many Quakers lived in Counties Wexford and Kildare where frequent atrocities were recorded, only one Friend lost his life, and he had decided to keep his gun! Because of their non-partisan stance Friends were able to preserve relationships with both sides in the conflict, to nurse the wounded and to bring relief to all in the midst of the general suffering.

How do we act as peacemakers in our contemporary Ulster scene? It is true that the interests of Church and State no longer coincide as closely as in earlier centuries, but slogans such as 'For God and Ulster' remind us of the subtle combination of religion and politics. We are called to engage in what John Stott calls 'double listening'. We are to heed God's Word and at the same time listen to what our contemporaries are saying. Only thus are we able to communicate the Gospel effectively. The tragedy is that in our country too few are prepared to listen to and understand the hopes, fears and aspirations of the other side.

Action as peacemakers requires courage and perseverance to overcome the fears identified earlier. We must equip ourselves by seeking:

A deep personal faith that God alone can transform our present situation.

A confidence in God's grace and power to keep us pure and true in relationships with those from whom we differ.

A supreme loyalty to Christ rather than to our group.

An openness and candour about contacts we make with 'the other side'.

A conviction that the Gospel in its fullness brings healing to society as well as to the individual.

Christian witness which is expressed in these terms has a powerful effect upon a community which is only too prone to dismiss religion as a divisive and sectarian influence. The promise to peacemakers is that they will be called the children of God. This implies recognition by a sceptical world of the rule of God and the important role of those who perform this function.

Arthur Chapman is a member of Portadown Religious Society of Friends (Quaker). He is a former principle of Friends school Lisburn and a member of ECONI's Steering Group.

Gentleness

Our society is not gentle. Even naturally gentle individuals can grow hard when 'the troubles' are mentioned, and visitors from outside quickly notice that Northern Irish Christians are not particularly gentle towards each other when they disagree. Yet gentleness is the eighth fruit of the Spirit and the same Greek word is translated meekness in the third beatitude.

Violence is the opposite of gentleness. It has always been attractive and, despite the hyping of the 'new man' image, gentleness has always been counter-cultural. We abhor the idea of people being shot with guns, but enjoy James Bond. We hate war but love war novels. The attractiveness of violence probably lies in its connection with power. We must hate it because when we are recipients of violence we experience not just pain but an awful sense of powerlessness. But that does not remove our need to assert ourselves, be significant. The human desire for power is formidable.

Yet gentleness is not a denial of inner strength, it is not doormat material. Jesus before Pilate used gentleness as strength, and Pilate felt it.

The church has a truly awful reputation for using violence inappropriately, seen in the crusades, the burning of dissidents, the support for forced apartheid and much else in its history. However violence is not always incompatible with Christianity. There are times when God is a violent God, and Jesus did violently cleanse the temple. The violence of surgery is occasionally all that is left to the doctor. So there are times when the glory of God and love of our fellow man require us to lay aside gentleness. But these are rare and then even a pure motive is not enough, the Christian must calculate. Martin Luther King had a point when he said, 'I reject violence because the short term gain is always smaller than the long term loss.' This is generally true and, of course, always true for political violence in a democratic situation.

by
**Graham
Cheeseman**

an attribute of peace

Gentleness, then, is the usual requirement of God. What does this mean? I have three suggestions.

A Carefulness not to Hurt

Our desire should be not to harm anyone by what we say or do unless it is absolutely necessary. This is love in action. The pain of another becomes a pain within. Emotional pain is particularly easily caused, so the gentle person will develop tact, which is simply being able to judge the effect of attitudes, words and deeds and to modify them accordingly. Christian leadership is gentle. Christian attitudes across cultural and community divides are informed by a desire for the attractiveness of gentleness.

A Gentle Spirit

The bible tells us that there is a way of conducting disputes among Christians. Paul told Timothy to address those who oppose him in a spirit of gentleness (2 Tim 2:25). A contentious spirit is an unnatural cancer within evangelicalism. We have a multitude of people who are 'contending for the faith' and attacking fellow believers for differences of view, usually on secondary matters. As Tozer says, the essentials are blessedly few. Yet love is not rude, is not self-seeking, always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres - is gentle. Nothing is more ridiculous than a person claiming to

contend for the cause of Christ in a manner that demonstrates his or her lack of the gifts of the spirit of Christ.

Meekness not Power

Christ's cause is best pursued from a position of human weakness rather than strength, meekness rather than power. Gideon had to learn that the use of large numbers (perhaps a majority) was a disadvantage that had to be jettisoned before God could work. Paul needed to learn that it was only when he was weak that he was strong in God's work. Again and again the church in its history has tried to do God's work from a position of strength or power. Charlemagne forced into baptism the Saxons he conquered. The Jesuits of the late sixteenth century bent their efforts to the conversion of the Daimyos, rulers of Japan. Protestants used the might of the British empire for their own acceptance and protection. But non-Christian means do not easily produce Christian ends and God has chosen the weak to confound the strong, so no flesh may glory in his presence.

Let us pray for the fruit of gentleness and remember that, in God's intentions, it is the meek who will inherit this much fought-over piece of earth.

Graham Cheeseman is the Principle of Belfast Bible College. His previous work included eight years in Nigeria teaching theology and service as a Baptist minister in England.

A Long Road to healing

*It is the
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In recent years the term peacebuilding has found its way into the language of those concerned with peace, not just in Northern Ireland but around the world. It defines an activity that is not simply keeping the peace between hostile parties. Nor is it only the work of making peace through bringing agreement between those who are in conflict. Peacebuilding is the actions required to transform a society from conflict to long term peaceful relationships and structures.

The Christian Vision

As such it has a certain appeal to Christians. The biblical concept of peace is conveyed in the word *shalom*. Shalom is the purpose and gift of God for all of humankind. It embraces not just the idea of peace with God as a necessary remedy to our spiritual disorder, but God's concern for our personal and social well being and wholeness. It is the proper concern of biblical faith to see right relationships and just structures in place for the benefit of all.

Equally the command of Jesus to repent and the invitation to follow is but the start of a journey. Its goal is our final entry into the place where God dwells, the city in which there is no more death or crying, where the great tree stands whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. We are called to live in the light of this vision of the future. And whatever struggles exist in this world we are those who are being transformed through the renewing of our minds to be fit inheritors of this spiritual kingdom as the children of God.

While the New Testament leaves little room for us to escape our obligations to be people of peace, it is often difficult to see how this can be worked out in the situation we find ourselves facing. However we must remember that this was equally a challenge for the early church. Their world was as brutal and unforgiving as ours appears. The injunction to be peaceable is not some idealistic escapism but the costly imperative of being a follower of the prince of peace.

by
David
Porter

In what ways can we consider the idea of peacebuilding as being a helpful insight to our task of Christian witness in a world of conflict?

The Long View

First we must understand that peace in this life is not a static state or condition, nor a particular stage of human existence that we reach. Peace involves the dynamic of relationships - in the family, in the church, in the community, and between nations. For the Christian it is a commitment to live at peace with all in so far as it depends on us.

Then because we live in a fallen world, we must understand that the nature of the peace we can enjoy in this life is always going to be imperfect. True peace does require justice. But justice can be frustrated and corrupted by sin and it is part of our suffering in a broken world that evil does appear to go unpunished. True peace does require reconciliation. But we all know that due to human pride often the best accommodation we can arrive at in relationships is to agree to co-exist in a state of mutual tolerance if not mutual respect.

Peacebuilding stresses the *process* of bringing peace about, taking steps that may at this stage appear small or inadequate, but which provide the dynamic that helps us move towards the ultimate goal. This requires vision, a long-term view of what a transformed society, community, family or church will look like. It is our vision that motivates us to make the investment of time and energy that is necessary now to address both the immediate and short term needs of a conflict situation.

As Christians we often expect of society what we know is not possible in ourselves. Our journey of discipleship is one of transformation, the day by day dealing with sin in our lives. So too in the social and political world. There is only one revolution that will usher in the reign of peace and that is when Jesus comes. Until then, fired by that vision, it is the hard work of a building site, seeking to construct the kind of relationships and structures that allow peace to be nurtured and grow.

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The Big Picture

It is also important to understand what peace is not. It is not simply the absence of physical violence. The verbal abuse of the sectarian slogan is an act of intimidation and attack on our neighbour. The emotional blackmail of a family member is an aggressive manipulation of them in order to get our own way. And let us not forget the economic dominance of the multinational or of the developed world as a means of securing our prosperity at the expense of others.

Of course physical violence, particularly killing, receives the strongest condemnation in scripture. But the law and the prophets are no more lenient on those who oppress their neighbour in social, economic and ethnic terms. Structural and corporate sin is as much the result of the fall and contribute to

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human violence as much as the acts of violence committed by individuals whether for their cause or for criminal intent.

Nor is peace simply the presence of good relationships. Many would claim that their best friends are Catholic or Protestant. Numerous events and encounters have been organised in Northern Ireland to bring children and adults from the two sides together as friends. Even where trust exists between friends, nationalists and unionists will continue to disagree on important issues. The potential for conflict is always there, and there will always remain those who exploit it with their violence.

Peacebuilding stresses that in order to bring about a peaceful society we must address all these concerns. Personal and structural, reconciliation and reconstruction are all part of the bigger picture of the transformation needed in a divided society. What the preacher does in addressing the need for personal conversion is the partner to the police officer upholding the law on the streets. Bringing together people across the sectarian divide is only the first step to reaching agreement on the political divisions. Working to help those in need is but a small gesture unless we work to remove the causes of deprivation.

For many Christians the gospel has become personalised at the expense of its radical and social implications. Psalm 85 could be described as the 'psalm of the peacebuilders'. Here is the breadth of God's concern for a society at ease with itself:

Mercy and truth will meet: justice and peace will kiss each other. (Verse 10 translated from Spanish.)

Commenting on this, John Paul Lederach, a Mennonite peacebuilder says:

Truth is the longing for acknowledgement of wrong and the validation of painful loss and experiences, but it is coupled with mercy, which articulates the need for acceptance, letting go, and a new beginning. Justice represents the search for individual and group rights, for social restructuring and restitution, but it is linked with peace, which underscores the need for interdependence, well being and security.

The Wider Horizon

Finally we must remember that all of us in a conflict situation have responsibilities. It is too easy to focus on the politicians or the paramilitaries as being the only cause of or solution to our troubles. Conflict cannot be sustained without the nurture of the community it infects no more than peace can be built with just the agreement of the politicians. Peacebuilding stresses the need for us all to accept that a conflict that has gone on for so long has become part of us all. Where we live, who we socialise with, how we relate to those who don't share our religious convictions. All this has been part of our personal and community journey for generations, providing the soil in which the seed of sectarianism and hatred has taken root and grown.

Therefore to bring an end to conflict we all need to allow peacebuilding to become an integral part of our lives. The welcome of a republican or loyalist into our home, the commitment to be part of a sports club that draws its members from across the divide, the respectful engagement with our Catholic or Protestant neighbour on religious questions. All this must become part of our journey from antagonism to accommodation, from tragedy to transformation.

Peacebuilding is about transformation. Transformation in how individuals and groups handle their response to the conflict. Transformation in their relationships with the other parties to the conflict. This requires a commitment to address the issues of politics and power that have perpetuated our conflict for so long.

In all of this the experience of peacebuilding in our world suggests that it will take as long to build the peace as it did to wage the war. It will certainly take greater imagination and resources than most of us yet realise.

Jesus said: 'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' Luke 9:62

David Porter is Director of ECONI. In 1997 he completed an MA thesis on The Long Road to Peace: Lessons for Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland 1993-1996

" All Taigs are Targets"

I came to Belfast
And on the bus I saw graffiti
In the underpass
"All Taigs are Targets"
In brown spray paint.

I did not know the meaning
Or who had written this
But a Taig must surely be a term
To describe a man,
God's own creation.

Did it matter
As I left
That I'd been afraid to ask.
Not wanting to cause offence
I let the question lie unasked.

Would it have helped
To understand
To tell the folks back home
Of insults and their derivations
Of man's deep hate of man.

"It does not matter,
Need not be known
The truth is greater still.
Much greater than the hatred for,
All Taigs are Targets of God's Love"
So said the small calm voice.

*by
Neil
Smart*

During a recent visit to Northern Ireland Neil Smart wrote this reflection as a response to a hate filled slogan on a Belfast wall. Neil is a veterinarian by profession and a warden in Dibden Anglican Church, Southampton

The Holy Warrior

Glory to God in the Highest

And on earth peace to men

On whom his favour rests. (Luke 2.14)

It seemed simple enough - God had made a promise and now that promise was fulfilled in the birth of a baby. The angels announced the good news and the world was filled with the mystery of the Word made flesh.

Yet even as the brightness of his glory began to shine, a shadow was already appearing. 'This child,' said Simeon to Mary 'is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Luke 2.34-35)

The shadow gave way to a darkness that seemed to eclipse the promise of peace. In the heart of Herod, a puppet King doggedly protecting his position, a terrible violence was born. Peace? Not for Herod's soldiers, obediently butchering the innocent. Not for the mothers of Jerusalem, mourning the slaughter of their little ones.

The Prince of Peace had brought a sword. The light of his life provoked the darkness. The healer wounded. The violent reaction that accompanied the birth of Jesus was to accompany him throughout his whole ministry. In his wake, there was conflict and division. His works provoked fear and prejudice and his words awakened hate and violence.

Why did the Prince of Peace stir such hostility and conflict?

*By
Alwyn
Thomson*

The Mighty Brought Low

Once a great kingdom in its own right, Israel by the time of Jesus was reduced to the status of a minor province of a much greater Empire. The throne of David was empty and the people were ruled by Roman lackeys and second rate bureaucrats.

Those who had inherited the mantle of the priests, prophets and teachers of wisdom were bound by their traditions, a pale reflection of the heroes of the past.

The land that once flowed with milk and honey was barely able to sustain the ordinary people who clung on to economic survival.

The promise of Shalom had become a vague memory. Peace? Justice? Well-being? Wholeness? There was precious little to be found in Israel. Yet God had promised and the people were waiting.

The Battle Belongs to the Lord

Like all afflicted people Israel longed and hoped for peace, peace with justice. But they had a clear idea of how it would come about. If the cause of their distress was their enemies, then deliverance would only come with the defeat of those who oppressed them. Only through the triumph of God's anointed over Roman occupation would the land be free and God's true peace be established.

It was hardly a novel idea. There was plenty in Israel's history and the Scriptures to convince them that this was how God would work. God was, after all, Israel's Holy Warrior.

Every year as the people celebrated Passover they heard again the Song of Moses, sung as the armies of Egypt perished in the waters of the Red Sea:

The LORD is a warrior;

The LORD is his name. (Exodus 15.3)

God, the warrior, who brought the people out of captivity also brought them into a new land. When others stood in their way, God gave Israel military

victory. The great fortified city of Jericho fell before Joshua (Joshua 5-6). Yet this was no ordinary clash. God initiated the battle. God, through the ark of the covenant, led the people as they marched around the walls. God determined the strategy and claimed the spoils of war for himself. This became the classic pattern of Holy War. God fought on behalf of his people against their enemies.

A Mighty Hand And Outstretched Arm

God established Israel in a land flowing with milk and honey. But what did they make of it? Was Israel a place of peace, justice and well-being? Far from it. In the books of Kings and Chronicles, we hear God's repeated judgement on the leaders of Israel: '*He did evil in the eyes of the Lord.*' Far from being a place of peace, Israel was a land of idolatry and rebellion. Far from being a place of justice, Israel was a land of oppression and exploitation:

*They trample on the heads of the poor
as upon the dust of the ground*

and deny justice to the oppressed. (Amos 2.7)

Faced with a nation that had failed to seek peace and pursue it the prophets began to tell the story of God the mighty warrior in a different way. God's promise of protection, given to Israel in the covenant, was conditional on the people's obedience:

If you fully obey the Lord your God...the Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven...

However, if you do not obey the Lord your God...the Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them in one direction but flee from them in seven. (Deuteronomy 28.1,7,15,25).

The prophets understood the implications when the people did not. The mighty hand, the outstretched arm and the outpoured wrath, once turned against Israel's enemies was now turned against Israel - the enemy of God (see Deuteronomy 5.15; Ezekiel 20.33-34). The Holy Warrior was now fighting against his people, not for them.

God Will Come

God's ultimate judgement was to take his people out of the land and send them into exile. During the time of the exile God did not intervene as he had in the past. In the books of Daniel and Zechariah God again makes himself known as a warrior but in new ways. No longer did God fight Israel's battles against human enemies. Instead, God gave the people a vision of a time when he would intervene in a decisive way. The Lord would be king over the earth and Jerusalem will be secure (Zechariah 14.9-11).

God had protected his people in the past. Their exile was the result of God's judgement on their disobedience. But they could look forward with hope - even though the present was a time of fear and insecurity, God would come. Peace and justice would reign.

Binding the Strong Man

So Jesus came claiming to be the fulfilment of God's promises (Mark 1:15). Would this man throw out the Romans, depose the Herods, restore the throne of David, unite Israel and bring peace to the land? The people thought it unlikely. Yet in ways they could not discern, Jesus the Prince of Peace was still the Holy Warrior. The trouble was that they had identified the wrong enemy. Jesus was not among them to overthrow Rome, but to overcome the strong man - Satan - who resisted the coming of God's kingdom (Luke 11.21-23). Jesus had come to fight against and destroy the forces of evil that kept humanity oppressed and suffering (Mark 1.23-28).

This was not what an oppressed and angry people wanted. Their world was shaped by power, violence, exclusion and fear. They wanted something immediate and revolutionary. The peace and justice they sought did not require the destruction of these forces, simply their rearrangement on terms more favourable to Israel. Their understanding of God's vision of peace was shallow. They believed they could establish it through the mechanisms of violence.

Jesus' vision of peace, his proclamation of a new way, subverted and challenged both Rome and Israel. If the peace of Rome was a far cry from the peace of God, so was the kind of peace dreamed of in the hills of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem.

In the end, no one knew how to deal with this unlikely peacemaker. If the people of Israel were disappointed, the rulers of Israel were nervous. Jesus, far from bringing peace, threatened their carefully constructed peace. Together, people and rulers conspired to rid Israel of this troublesome preacher.

Day of Wrath, Day of Triumph

As Jesus went to the cross he endured the wrath of humanity and the wrath of God. But humanity's victim was God's peacemaker. He was also God's warrior defeating the powers of evil through his triumph on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. And as the beginning of the gospel was marked by the proclamation of peace, so too the end of the gospel:

While they were still talking...Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' (Luke 24.36)

Principalities And Powers

It was left to Paul to work out all the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection. In his death, says Paul, Jesus has defeated humanity's enemies - not the Greeks and the Romans, but the principalities and powers (Colossians 2.15; Ephesians 1.21; 1 Corinthians 5.:24). Other enemies of humanity were overcome too. What Jurgen Beker has called the 'apocalyptic power alliance' - sin, flesh, law and death - was defeated.

Yet Jesus triumph did not bring his followers rest. As seen in Ephesians 6.12-17 and other passages Paul makes clear that for Christians there is still a fight to be fought. However, once again the stress is on a different kind of enemy - the cosmic forces opposed to God which are the source of violence and conflict among humans. The church's battle is not against flesh and blood, and in this spiritual battle we are disarmed of our human weapons and equipped with the weapons of God.

The promise of Christ's ultimate victory could have led to triumphalism or militancy. Paul

countered this by constantly reminding his hearers that 'the sign of triumph was an instrument of weakness and shame: the Cross - the paradoxical hallmark of Paul's theology'. (Longman & Reid)

Violence, Peace, Justice and Politics

Why all this talk of war in an article on peace? Because - even as Christians - our understanding of peace and justice are too narrowly political. Even as Christians, we aspire to achieve peace through as much violence as is unavoidably "necessary".

We point to the biblical witness of a God who fights for his people against injustice and evil. Yet, in the process, we lose sight of the true nature of God the warrior. We linger with the vision of Joshua at Jericho and forget Jesus. A God who executes justice on the flesh and blood enemies of his people appeals to us much more than a God who suffers at the hands of those enemies and conquers through death and suffering.

It is easy to see peace and justice in purely political terms. We ask what hinders peace - and answer according to our political convictions. We see the injustice against ourselves and our own. We aim to overcome those who deny us justice. However, that will not achieve disinterested justice for all.

Peace was political for Jesus' contemporaries. Jesus did not see peace in political terms. No doubt in pursuit of peace and justice, they put him to death. For us too, our methods of pursuing peace can betray our claims to follow the Prince of Peace.

Blessed are the Peacemakers

In a world full of violence, how do we make peace? In a world where the pursuit of peace is so often used to justify violence, how should we live?

It is clear that talking will achieve little by itself. Otherwise peace people on peace trains and peace marches, making peace pledges in peace talks and peace processes would have brought us to paradise.

Christians must first be peaceable people in the Christian community - the Church. It is pointless, not to say embarrassing, when Christians talk of a new way of living, but show so little evidence of it in the life of the church. That is of course proof that the gods of this world - violence, bitterness, conflict and suspicion - have a more powerful grip on us than we suppose. Only in living out forgiveness and reconciliation in the Christian community can we begin to be peacemakers. However, an embrace of these virtues will show up problems of division and conflict deeper than we expected.

The second requirement is that Christians should abandon self-serving concepts of peace and justice. A great many freedom movements have worked for the redistribution of power - from the haves to the have-nots. Many freedom fighters have used violence as a means to wider justice. Christians should see such struggles for what they are in the light of God's justice.

Biblical faith involves Christians in a deeper exercise of discernment. All human visions of peace and justice are cast in political terms. Not all are equally corrupt. The church is called to critical reflection, but there is a place for active Christian involvement in shaping social values and practices.

The church can fall into the trap of playing the game by somebody else's rules. The other more common pitfall is that the church becomes a defender of the social structure it has helped to create. Where these things happen, the church no longer gives clear witness to Jesus the peacemaker.

Jesus involved himself intimately with his society and its search for peace and justice - but his was an uncomfortable presence. He confronted everyone and comforted none. His vision challenged the status quo - and allowed no other to take its place. That should be the role of the church.

Finally, Christians must wait. This is the truth of the prophetic vision. True peace and perfect justice are the eschatological gift of God. The greatest contribution the church can make to bringing about peace and justice is to join with John in praying:

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. (Revelation 22:20)

Alwyn Thomson is Research Officer with ECONI and is currently involved in the 'God, Land & Nation' project. He is author of a number of ECONI publications including his most recent book, 'Politics of Holiness'.

reviews

The Art of Forgiveness

Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz
WCC Publications, 1996 £6.99

“The Bible understands forgiveness as a process which includes both the perpetrator and the victim. Forgiveness can occur when the perpetrator asks for it and the victim grants it. This mutuality is basic to an understanding of the biblical concept. Both sides are changed by the encounter. A healing takes place that paves the way for a better co-operation between formerly conflicting partners. Much more than a word or gesture, forgiveness is a genuine process of encounter, of healing, of the releasing of new options for the future. A guilty and painful past is redeemed in order to establish reliable foundations for renewed fellowship in dignity and trust. Forgiveness frees the future from the haunting legacies of the past.” (4-5) From this biblical perspective Muller-Fahrenholz explores the nature of forgiveness - both personal and political.

At the core of that exploration is the conviction that forgiveness has been cheapened and trivialised because the concept of guilt is no longer taken seriously. Taking guilt seriously, Muller-Fahrenholz argues, means taking the other person seriously and dealing with forgiveness in the context of a relationship. Every

act of transgression ties victim and perpetrator together, but the act of forgiveness sets both victim and perpetrator free for a new relationship. Yet many are afraid to enter into that relationship for it requires that both lay aside their defences and become exposed and vulnerable. However, when this happens forgiveness becomes possible - a painful experience, it is also liberating.

Forgiveness, argues Muller-Fahrenholz, is also related to remembering. No longer the tool of suspicion and bitterness, remembering can shape “a commitment to try again, a readiness to start afresh.” (36) Thus forgiving is not forgetting - it is, in Muller-Fahrenholz’s words, a re-remembering.

Having discussed forgiveness at a personal level, Muller-Fahrenholz asks “Is forgiveness an element in politics?” and argues that it can be.

At the core of politics, he suggests, is not economics but memory. However, a people’s memories can be highly selective. These selective memories form “a way of rereading history that looks at national victories without counting the damage done to others...without contemplating the guilt involved...Processes of forgiveness, by contrast, start by taking into account the victims of each victory...Forgiveness knows that victims are the same everywhere. So it approaches history in an inclusive way.” (48)

Muller-Fahrenholz turns to specific examples to illustrate his argument, focusing in particular on the role of leaders. Leaders, argues Muller-Fahrenholz, “encapsulate the corporate identity of their respective peoples.” But when they venture beyond that identity - rejecting or redefining the chosen memories and encompassing others in those memories - they become traitors to some. The consequence is that those leaders who dare to step out end up victims of the violence once directed at the enemy. Such was the fate of Anwar Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin. No wonder, then, that it is difficult for leaders to make that breakthrough.

Yet those who do, encouraged and aided by others in society, can transform situations of conflict. “The art of remembering is...an effort to transfigure past pains in order to construct vital and forward-looking societies.” (59)

Much has been written on forgiveness and reconciliation, and much of what has been written is hardly worth reading. This book is an exception. It is wise, biblical and always insightful. It is highly recommended.

Alwyn Thomson

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Pardon and Peace:

Reflections on Making Peace in Ireland

Nicholas Frayling

SPCK £10.99

This is a difficult book to review. It is hard to disagree with its central thesis, that repentance is at the heart of creating the conditions for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. To suggest otherwise is to run the danger of denying the very heart of Christian faith and spirituality. Yet while there is much to affirm there are some fundamental deficiencies.

The content of *Pardon and Peace* is primarily a personal journey. As such it lacks the rigour of biblical, historical and political critique that must inform our discussion, if only to correct our limited grasp of the complexity of the Northern Ireland situation. By relating a series of personal encounters with small groups and individuals, the author allows their perceptions to provide the basis for his analysis of the way forward. This serves only to perpetuate the myths and half-truths that so easily define perceptions in Ireland. His personal reaction tends to dominate the legitimate insight he brings, and his method of relating the stories at times carries a

patronising tone. His response, particularly towards Unionists, reinforces the worst caricatures.

Most disturbing is the underlying drift, which although qualified, nevertheless sets the pattern and tone throughout. Namely, that ecumenism is the only context for true reconciliation; that the logic of land, nationhood and history necessarily points towards a united Ireland; that there is a given model of a christian nation, national church and national repentance; and that the British (English) should apologise and get out.

All of these are highly contested points and while the author presents his case with conviction, the absence of any acknowledgement or engagement with the alternatives makes this a highly unsatisfactory book, especially to give to an interested outsider. I found the book simply did not go far enough in providing a radical biblical alternative. The fundamentalist ecumenism of Frayling is as dangerous an ally of peace as fundamentalist evangelicalism is its opponent. Ecumenism and peace making are not two sides of the same coin.

Equally the gospel is no more advanced by uniting Ireland than it is by defending Ulster. For me

this assumption was the most disappointing part of Frayling's argument. The author appears to assume the sacralist model of church and state that plagues both Protestant and Catholic traditions, not only in Ireland. This needs to be biblically challenged root and branch and not replaced with a more benign interpretation of a distorted model. Consequently, while he rightly challenges us to repentance, it is hard to escape the implication that the English should repent and get out simply for the sake of their own national wellbeing. What hope does that leave for the divided community of Northern Ireland? Whose national side in Ireland is God on?

The flaws in the book are too serious for me to give unqualified recommendation and I honestly question its value in informing a wider audience of their responsibilities towards Ireland. Personally, I found this book disturbing reading. It not only closed down my space both theologically and politically but also brought out the worst of the non-conformist dissenter in me. At best it is a warning to read more widely, make longer visits and certainly don't let the natives see how you explain them to your friends!

David Porter
Director of ECONI

NEWS & events

Citizenship Forum

A Time to Decide
Tuesday 19 May (YMCA, Belfast)
7.30 - 10.00pm

In the run-up to the Referendum ECONI is running a Christian Citizenship Forum to explore some of the issues raised by the Agreement, and consider our response to the decisions we must make.

In the first session we will hear a biblical perspective from David McMillan, Chair of ECONI's Central Co-ordinating Group. In the second session a number of invited political representatives will debate the issues from a variety of perspectives. There will be opportunity for questions and contributions from the audience.

We hope those who attend regularly will be able to come along and we would encourage as many others as possible to be with us as we face a critical period in our community's history.

Further information is available from the office.

ECONI Resources

Jeremiah: A Prophet for our Time
A Series of six Bible Study and Sermon Notes

As part of our ongoing commitment to resource Christians we are continuing to produce fresh and relevant material. The Jeremiah Resource Pack is a new series designed to help people explore the relevance of this important prophet to the issues of our society. The pack contains notes, study questions and historical information and is adaptable to all kinds of groups and situations.

Also available are Resource Packs on '*The Politics of Holiness*', '*Citizenship*' & '*Culture and Identity*'.

The Packs are on sale for £3.50 from the office.

Back to the Future

A Second Look at Protestant Culture
Friday 10 - Tuesday 14 July

Belfast Bible College (kindly granted)
Residential £90. Non-residential £60

This event was so successful last year that we are running it again this July. The conference will consist of a four day residential involving Bible reading, workshops and field trips. The programme is designed to help people reflect biblically on themes relating to religion, culture and identity. The event facilitator is Derek Poole (ECONI's Development Officer) and we are delighted that Rev Tony Davidson (First Armagh Presbyterian Church) is coming as our main speaker. There will also be a number of invited

New Publication

Politics of Holiness
Alwyn Thomson

It is not everyday that someone applies the concept of holiness to community relations. In this important book Alwyn Thomson raises many neglected issues and invites us to consider the biblical call to holiness as a passionate engagement with a hurting world.

A comprehensive series of Pathways books are available covering a variety of themes pertinent to faith, culture and politics. If you would like a copy of our publications list we will gladly send it to you on request.

guests who will help us explore the issues together. A full brochure and booking form is available from the ECONI office.

**Resourcing Christians
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