

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— <sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

**As I thought and prayed about this sermon**, I read through the readings for the week and was struck by this line from Ephesians: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace...”

There is a huge amount to think about, right here, simply on the subject of Jesus Christ being our peace. But I want to begin with an example, from a friend of mine.

A couple of years ago she went to the doctors because she kept having digestive issues, energy issues and such like. As these problems persisted, she was eventually sent for tests and scans, and they were horrified to discover that she had an enormous cancer in her abdomen. It had to be removed as soon as possible, but this itself would be an extraordinarily difficult procedure. There was every risk she could die. The surgery itself was a success, but still, in the recovery period she fluctuated between life and death, as the organs that had been squeezed by the growth needed to recover and begin to function properly again. And she knew her life hung in the balance. Always a faithful, prayerful, good woman, nonetheless she found herself, between sleep and wakefulness, between brokenness and ecstasy, thrust close to God. And in that closeness she discovered extraordinary faith and peace and closeness with God. But also, despite, as I say, being a good woman, she found herself scrutinising her past, finding this brought up in her ongoing peacemaking with God. She was already ‘right’ with God — she believed, she accepted the grace of the cross, but still — after she began to seriously recover, she now made it her urgent business to redeem the failures of her past, the things that hadn’t worked out, and the relationships in which there was still anything less than perfect peace. Closeness to God, on the brink of life and death brought peace, but also an urgent need to extend that peace to the many people her life had intertwined with. There was still real peacemaking work to do — and as she did recover, she pursued this.

When we talk about peace one of the problems we encounter is the diversity of meaning within that word. The Hebrew ‘Shalom’ embraces senses of peace, rightness and wholeness, even as far as David enquiring after the ‘shalom’ of the battle — which is: is it going our way?

Come to the world of the New Testament and the Romans busily extended their empire under the fiction of the 'pax Romana': the Roman peace. What they meant was that once they had conquered every nation and all the others were scared of them, there would not be war nor any obstacle to their general being and mission. Enforced submission by control and fear is not *my* idea of peace, but they thought it to be.

I think there is much more, though, than absence of conflict. I have already touched on peace with God. What does it mean to have *real* peace with God? Surely this begins with the acceptance of God's grace and forgiveness, and a falling in line with God's will — including significant peacemaking in turn, just as my friend pursued.

Sometimes we talk about peace as an absence of noise. Peace and quiet. This sort of peace is important to us! This might include peace with nature. We want to sense being part of something bigger — not harming the beautiful creation of which we are an organic part.

Other times we are thinking of peace in terms of harmony, collaboration, understanding and compassion with those around us. A friendly neighbourhood. A family in sync with each other.

Is there peace in your soul? Peace with God will likely be the foundation of that peace for us, but you need also be at peace with your self-expectation and with your moral code. Perhaps you need to be at peace with your age? I'm not getting at *you*, particularly, however old you are. The vast worth of the market for moisturising, revitalising skin cream to banish wrinkles speaks of a world that is very much not at peace with aging.

Peace should also imply no fear, no threat, no impositions, no power imbalances. A community may not be at peace if one person is holding all the cards — even if that person believes they're holding them benignly.

So that's peace as we experience it. How about as Paul discusses it here: Christ's peace?

Paul comes back, over and over, to the peace that was being forged between Jew and Gentile, through faith in Christ. Without seeking to be rude to Paul, it is his constant thought, his *idée fixe*. Paul wants peace and reconciliation between Jews and gentiles — by first seeing that both can find their peace in Christ, and having found that, there can be no difference between them. For Paul Christ is simply the answer to absolutely everything! Do you want world peace? Spread the gospel! Do you want food equality, less imbalance between rich and poor, between black and white, between slave and free and man and woman? Spread the gospel, because in faith, Christ will draw us together, compelling us to resolve our differences through the reconciliation which we have already found with God in him. If the cross shows us God's love, compassion and grace, we cannot help but by responding with love — compassion and grace. This will compel us into peacemaking — even at great cost — as Christ paid a great cost to show us the earnestness of his peace. As we share communion, as we break bread together, we affirm our determination to be one with God, and so one with each other — in unity and peace.

Despite the wide claim that religion causes wars, Christianity especially, is not the cause of war, and Christ is not the cause of war, but peace. In Christ we start with God — seek your peace with God. Accept his grace and start to forgive, following the Lord's prayer's encouragement to forgive as we are forgiven. That grace, working in us opens us to the healing of our souls and a peace within ourselves. This does not happen overnight. We may take the rest of our lifetime to heal from the conflict within ourselves. This is not separate to our peace with others. This peacemaking with others will begin with specific instances — the moments we were unfeeling, cruel, selfish or deliberate in any sin. It starts there, but continues in the reshaping of our character, in God's hands, as we put away any of the nastiness,

prejudice, selfishness, ready judgement, or any other fault in us that is less than glorifying to God.

Why do we do this?

We do this for God, responding to God's love with our love.

We do it for others, out of sincere goodwill.

But we do this for ourselves too — to live in true peace with God, with our neighbour, and with ourselves is a truly blessed state — which will bring us more joy than we can possibly know or understand.

Amen.

SDG.

All blessings,

Tim.

*Come along to the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Wildflower Festival Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 28<sup>th</sup>*

*12 noon till 5.30pm*