

Peace at the Centre

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Canberra Baptist Church

26 June 2010

It would be a strange disciple of Jesus to say that peace is wrong-headed or unimportant, but in my experience few Christians locate peace at the very heart of faith and the Christian life, which is where I think it belongs. So this morning I want to enable you to see why I think peace belongs at the centre of *Christian* faith, so that even if you don't agree with me, you will at least understand why I happen to think about peace as I do.

First, let's clear away a misconception. For whatever reason, the term 'peace' has a rather flaccid feel about it; in English, at least, it isn't a term with connotations of strength. And it doesn't help that those Christians who have placed peace at the forefront of Christian faith and life, as in the historic peace churches, have so often termed their commitment 'non-resistance'. Non-resistance has been rightly criticised as leaving little room for social activism, at least the kind concerned for justice and human rights. In such communities of faith, peace has all too often been tarred with the brush of 'doormat discipleship'; in other words, the commitment to peace has been associated with being *passive* while injustice, cruelty and despotism have a field day.

I'll say a little bit more about Jesus later, but let the first thing I say about Jesus be that he is the measure of what the Christian commitment to peace is all about. I'll get to why a little later on. Here the point is that in Jesus' case, you don't get the impression of someone who was easily walked over; you don't get the impression of one who stood idly by while evil had its way with the world; you don't get the impression of someone who sat on his hands while the world wept. The overriding impression one gains of Jesus from the gospels is of one who confronted evil head on. He was nonviolent, but he was the epitome of strength, dogged determination and unflinching commitment. That is the image of peace I hold to – peace with grit, you might call it. So when I speak of a Christian commitment to peace, don't imagine a sappy, sentimental passivity that can't look the real world in the face. When Jesus blessed peacemakers, saying that *they* would be called God's children, he didn't bless peace-lovers, peace-advocates, or people like me who from time to time make a few noises about peace; rather, when Jesus blessed peacemakers, he blessed those people in the real world who build or broker peace in real-life situations in which the fabric of human community is ripped apart by conflict, stress, violence and injustice. Peace and peacemaking is not for ninnies, wusses and drop-outs but for people of passion and courage – *passion* for the world's well-being and *courage* to make the effort to change it for the better.

One thing I hope you will remember from today is this statement: *God is peace-prone*. You know how we say of some people that they are ‘accident-prone’, habitually falling off things, crashing into things or dropping things. Disaster-magnets, we might call them, because if something wrong is going to happen, it will inevitably happen to them. Well, as inevitable as that seems to be for some, there is an even deeper inevitability about God’s leaning toward peace. *God is peace-prone*. And God is so inevitably peace-prone that one can say God’s proneness toward peace is not simply the result of a divine preference for peace but rather because peace is of the essence of the reality we call God.

Now, if I were saying this about love, you would all be nodding your heads and thinking about the biblical definition of God in 1 John 4: ‘God is love’. But the Bible never says ‘God is peace’, does it? Well, not in so many words... (although cf. Judges 6:24). But hear me out.

If there is one thing most people know about Paul the apostle, it is that he had a life-changing experience that turned his life around from being an aggressive harasser of the early Christian movement to being a tireless witness to Jesus. I have thought long and hard about how Paul thought about God prior to his conversion/call and how he thought about God afterwards. Certain things did not change. Paul seems to have been as driven after as

before his encounter with the risen Lord, but both his letters and what we know of his life-experience after that encounter indicate a profound shift in his thinking about God. One of the few things about which Paul ever expresses regret is that he once persecuted early followers of Jesus. But that particular form of imposing his will on others stopped once he himself was stopped in his tracks by the realisation that he was, in fact, persecuting the risen Jesus. And from what he says in his letters, I think this shift in his practice coincided with a shift in his understanding of God. Keep in mind that Paul didn't switch gods; he believed in the same God after his encounter with the risen Jesus as before. But his understanding of God shifted, and it is quite clear that the shift in his understanding about God was the result of reflecting on what God had accomplished for us human beings in and through Jesus.

You all know, I'm sure, that both Paul and Paul's greatest admirer, Luke, sum up what God has done for us human beings in and through Jesus by using the language of peace and peacemaking. Eph 2:14 affirms that 'Christ is our peace', both in the sense that in and through Christ we are befriended by God but also that in and through Christ social and ethnic barriers are broken down. In short, in and through Jesus Christ, God was reconciling all things to himself, as Paul puts it in 2 Cor 5:18. Even Paul's more prominent language of 'justification', which in meaning is closer to 'rectifying', 'setting right' or 'restoring', has peacemaking connotations. And in Acts 10:36, Luke records

Peter speaking of God announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ. No one would dispute that the Christian understanding of God's initiative on behalf of humanity is basically that of reconciliation or peacemaking. But all too few Christians take the next step and ask: If Jesus is our measure of God and if in and through Jesus, God makes peace with humanity, what does that say about God? But Paul was one who did, and it shows up in a phrase he uses more or less unconsciously in a number of benedictions, namely, 'the God of peace', a phrase that appears six or seven times in his surviving letters.

Paul names God the 'God of peace' more than any other characterisation (1 Thessalonians 5:23; Philippians 4:9; 1 Corinthians 14:33; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Romans 15:33; 16:20; this same phrase recurs in the benediction of Hebrews 13:20, and 'Lord of peace', used christologically, appears in the benediction of 2 Thessalonians 3:16). Paul had no reason to disagree with the Johannine affirmation that 'God is Love' (1 John 4:7–21; cf. 2 Corinthians 13:11), but it is both telling and compelling that for Paul the God of Jesus Christ is pre-eminently the 'God of peace'.

In naming God the 'God of peace', Paul was borrowing from his Jewish heritage, in which the nature and action of God could be expressed by combining God's name with what is called a predicate noun (for example,

‘the God of truth’ in Isaiah 65:16). But he was also innovating by associating God’s character and action with the concept of peace. Outside of Paul’s letters and Hebrews 13:20, the phrase, ‘God of peace’, occurs in Jewish literature prior to or contemporaneous with Paul only in the Testament of Dan 5:2. Add to this that Paul could speak about the righteousness of God or the wrath of God, but he *never* refers to the ‘God of righteousness’ or the ‘God of wrath’ and *only once* does he speak of the ‘God of hope’ (Romans 15:13) or ‘God of love’ (2 Corinthians 13:11, ‘God of love *and peace*’). Put all this together, and the relative frequency with which Paul invokes the ‘God of peace’ is remarkable.

To put that into a nutshell, Paul’s encounter with the risen Jesus led not only to a change of life but also a change in his thinking about God, which was quite clearly a change in the direction of God as both peaceable in character and peacemaking in action.

When one considers the life-setting of Jesus, dominated as it was by Roman imperial violence, it is remarkable that despite the counter-imperial dimensions of his mission and message he should be remembered as one who challenged the political and religious status quo nonviolently. The presence of a small number of texts that (apparently) strike a different chord – for example, Matthew 10:34–36 or Luke 12:49–53, Luke 22:35–38 and Jesus’

forceful protest action in the temple – fails to compel the conclusion that Jesus might have taught his followers to respond to violence differently from himself. On the question of the moral value and validity of violence, one receives a single – and singularly clear – answer from Jesus, whether the Jesus of history or the Jesus of the canonical witness. On this point, as perhaps none other, there is concurrence between what is recorded about Jesus in the gospels and what can be ascertained about the historical figure of Jesus by a critical sifting of gospel traditions. Nonretaliation and love of enemies belong among the defining elements of the bedrock of the Jesus-tradition. In the face of hostile violence, Jesus chose to respond nonviolently, even when his own life was at stake, and the New Testament witness confirms that all whose moral selves were reshaped by his influence were exhorted to follow his example in this respect. As Richard Hays observes, ‘from Matthew to Revelation we find a consistent witness against violence and a calling to the community to follow the example of Jesus in accepting suffering rather than inflicting it’.¹

You might be thinking: OK, but what do you do with all those bits of the Bible that don’t picture God as a God of peace? God’s judgment in the flood story is hardly peaceful, and what about when Joshua was commanded by

¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament – Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 332. Swartley’s *Covenant of Peace* demonstrates that peace is a core concern in all major strands of the New Testament.

God to annihilate entire city-populations? And I'm sure you can think of many other similar sorts of passages. Well, what *is* one to do with biblical passages that seem to blow my peace-prone notion of God out of the water?

As I have pondered this difficulty, I have become more and more impressed by the overall shape of the Bible. For me, the incarnation provides *the* key, no matter the lock that needs unclasping. What I mean is that what we know about God in the life-story of Jesus Christ should come first in our thinking about God and God's relation to us people and the wider world. For Christians, that is *not* a new insight, but ever since NT times it has been used only haphazardly to grapple with problems of theology, morality and biblical interpretation.

Yet more may be said than that the incarnation is a good place to start. How does the Bible begin and end? [Creation story in Genesis 1 and the early verses of Genesis 2; vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22.] Beginnings and endings of stories, any stories, are crucial, and what's crucial about these two visions at the beginning and end of the Bible is that they are visions of *shalom*, which I translate as 'harmonious wholeness' or 'peace'. There is much one could say about these visions, but let me say one brief thing about each and then tie all that together with what I was saying about

incarnation. Speaking of 'tying up', what I need is some string. Perhaps an object lesson will help, with some simple props...

First, the creation story... You would all know that around the world there are many creation stories. One important thing about the creation story in Genesis is that it came into being as a result of Israelite contact with Babylonian culture. It would take me too long to summarise the Babylonian creation story, called the *Enuma Elish*, but the basic feature of the story is that the universe, the world and everything in it came into being as a result of violent warfare among the gods. Basically, the world is made from the bloodied corpse of the mother god, killed in the most violent way by her youngest son. Also, human beings are created by means of another murdered god. The story is bloody, and its basic message is that violence is written into the structure of the world. What some Darwinists have said about nature – that it is red in tooth and claw – the Babylonians had said long before.

With that creation story in mind, what do we notice about the Hebrew creation story? Exactly the opposite. Nothing is violated or killed in order to bring the cosmos into being. There is order and calm and even serenity. Keep in mind that this creation story may well have been written in Babylon. But in any case, it certainly presents a different understanding of the world.

Now a word about the New Jerusalem... Although Revelation is full of violent imagery, it ends with a vision adapted from Isaiah 65 and 66 about the restoration of Jerusalem as a place of solace for God's people. In other words, it anticipates the restoration of the created order to its original harmonious wholeness – *shalom*! But not only that... If you think about it, the original creation story, and especially the second one in Genesis 2–3, is very rural. God, we are told, starts with a garden, but the end-time vision is of a renewed city. And cities are made by people, not by God. What this tells us is that one dimension of God's majestic greatness is that our feeble efforts to improve upon God's creation, and in the process often ruining it, are taken up into God's restoration of the created order and find a place. But that is perhaps for another time. The key point for today is that both creation and the New Jerusalem are visions of peace.

Now, neither you nor I has ever met anyone who has experienced life as it is pictured in either the creation story or in the New Jerusalem, but these visions express how we think life *should be* experienced. First things and last things give expression to what is, for us, of both primary and lasting value. What is said about what *came first* indicates what we think to be of primary value; and what is said about what *will come last* indicates what we believe and hope *will last*. So, when we read the opening and closing visions of the Bible, we are as

close as ever we can get to what is, for Christians, the way things should be. They also indicate that God's will and purpose for creation is peace.

The literary device of matching beginning and ending, with the ending being not so much a strict repetition but a creative resonance with the beginning, is called *inclusio* because it *encloses* what comes between beginning and end in a way that holds them together just so. Or we could call such a device a literary frame, bookends that hold together in a meaningful way everything that comes in between. So, at the beginning of the Bible we have one peaceful frame, and at the end of the Bible we have another peaceful frame.

Now, you might say that that is perhaps interesting from a literary point of view, but that it doesn't make the Bible peaceful in its entirety. OK, maybe not, but it is not only that the Bible begins and ends with visions of shalom that counts. The most important thing is that these two visions of shalom that express God's will and purpose for creation are deeply in sync with the midpoint of the larger biblical story – the story of Jesus. I was tempted to call this string Ariadne's thread, after the Greek legend in which Ariadne gave to Theseus a guiding thread to enable him to find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. But instead I'm going to call it X's thread, a thread that provides guidance for reading the Bible because it holds together peaceful beginning with peaceful end because it passes through – *and must pass through* – the

story of peace that we know as the story of Jesus. What more need I say about a story in which beginning, middle and end speak with one voice of God's intention, intervention and reinvention as acts of peace?

In closing, forget everything if you must, *except these four things*:

- 1) God is peace-prone;
- 2) the Bible is framed by visions of harmonious wholeness, which tells us about God's will and purpose for the world;
- 3) the Jesus story is the interpretive centre of scripture; and
- 4) our guiding thread, which passes through the story of Jesus and therefore provides us with our basic orientation, against which everything else should be measured.