

Sermon by the Rev'd Dr. George Sumner

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United Nations' International Day of Peace

The new movie *Passendaele* intends to bring the horror and the courage of World War I alive for a new generation. Anyone who sits in this Cathedral, or along the walls of St. Paul's Bloor St., or near the back of Founders' Chapel, Wycliffe College, and looks at the commemorated names, is readily reminded week by week. On this Sunday, when we think about the mandate of peace, what better story to recall than the remarkable Christmas Truce. It was Christmas Eve, 1914, on the western front- the German soldiers began to festoon their trenches with lights. Then the singing of *Stille Nacht* led to English Christmas carols from the other side, then shouted Christmas greetings, visits across No Man's Land to exchange gifts of whisky, cigars, and chocolate, mutual help in burying the dead, the reciting of the 23rd psalm together, and closing with a football match. By the day after Christmas, the shelling and firing had begun again. We speak of war breaking out, but on the western front that day peace broke out, four years ahead of the final cessation of hostilities. How was it possible? We can point to at least the following two things, one behind those young soldiers, the other ahead. Behind them was a common memory, of Christmas at home, and more generally, of a Christian-influenced upbringing. Germans and British shared a Christian background. And the horizon ahead of them all was the imminent possibility of death. Urgency, fragility, the things that matter most: these are highlighted against the storm cloud background of the last things.

This is not the only example in Western history of an unpredictable, inexplicable outbreak of peace. My second example this morning comes from long, long before, in fact just about one thousand years ago. You all will recall the interesting speculation around Y2K and the new millennium. The turning of the last millennium was equally fraught with anxiety and hope. Oppressive local feudal

lords and dukes led to a longing for peace and order. Could it be that the Lord would return at the turn of the times? The appearance of miracles and relics made common people gather in great numbers in open fields, where they would cry out “Pax, Pax, Pax, Peace, Peace, Peace” with their palms open to the sky. Robert of France a generation later called for local popular assemblies to be held, efforts to reconcile peoples are advanced, hopes expressed that it was the time of Jubilee. The Truce of God became a custom that feuds and warfare were forbidden from Thursday to Sunday in honour of God. A wonderful story too, only a generation later this peace came to be understood for Christian peoples only, and all that fervor was funneled eventually into pogroms against the Jews and Crusades against the Muslims. Peace does break out, and then our own corrupted natures break out as well. The truce of God collapsed in time, but the very same factors made it possible for its time, one reason behind and one ahead. All those people, nobles to peasants to religious, shared a Christian culture - the Jubilee of Israel, the coming of Christ at the end of time to bring in the kingdom of God. And all of them lived, they believed, on the edge of the end of time, the cusp of doom and a new beginning.

What do we learn from all this: thinking about peace, like Rohrsach, tells us who we are. It is irrepressible in our hearts. It is alien to who we are on the war-torn no-man’s-land we have made of the world. We long for it in our inner selves, but it is fleeting. It shimmers out in front of us, but can turn quickly from jubilee to crusade. Peace needs to be pursued, but psychologically, politically, socially, it will end up in despair - that is why the place to think and pray about it is here ,and the right day is the Lord’s day.

This morning’s Epistle is about one thing: who Jesus Christ is, in the widest and deepest sense. It answers for us the question “what is peace?” by asking first “Who is Jesus Christ?” The first thing we learn is that he is made the heavens and the earth, the Lord God himself. All the created powers in the world answer to him. They may be warring now, but He has the final say and the final power to put them in their place. One readily thinks of the story of the stilling of the storm, where a word of Jesus commands the waves themselves. But he is also the image of the unseen God, and the image of God,

Genesis tells us, is also what we human beings were made to be in. He is perfectly God and perfectly human too, and his humanity shows the rest of humankind what its true and proper role in creation is, not as lord over it, but as the one who must help to order and serve the creation. And, though we live in a world now spoiled and corrupted, a world at war, we can begin to see this how the world was meant to be, and who stands over it, and what our role in it is, as we look at him, we who are in the Church. For it is in the Church, its sacraments, its proclamation, that the order of how things ought to be, of peace, of Shalom, can be heard and seen. So we are told that the creator of all things is also the head of the body, the Church. The head is over the body, and keeps all the organs in place, and tells it how to move. But in the broken world in which we live, this order, things in their proper relation to one another and to God, has been disrupted. We are in our trenches. And so Jesus Christ, the perfect image, must come among us, into the trenches, though he bears in himself, amazingly, the fullness of God's very being! There in the trenches, in the fields of violence, he takes on himself all the causes and all the effects of the hatred and violence that destroys peace: Paul says "he himself creates (recreates!) Shalom, peace, right order, with God through the shedding of his blood, the consequence of the utter lack of peace, on the cross."

The problem with peace is this: we want it, but it is out in front of us. It has to do with the kingdom of God, with the last day. It has to do with the hope that there will come a day of God, when the circle will prove finally to be unbroken. Everything depends on that final resolution, because what person, or what nation, doesn't have its complaints, its case against someone, for the lack of peace? It depends on settling every score on the last day, but we don't trust that idea too - is it pie in the sky? Does it empty the cry for justice now? How do I know it will come? What will it look like? We too raise our palms to the sky and cry "pax, pax" to God for a great truce, but are not so sure as those peasants that it will come on cue.

And that is why everything, when it comes to peace, our longing for it, our despair about it, the way God has answered our need that is realistic, hopeful, and yet encourages us to set out in a costly

way into some no-man's land or other - everything depends on this verse: "Jesus is the foundational one, the starting point, for he is the first one raised up again from the dead." Peace is a resurrection idea for Christ. By that I mean that it is a hope, but one that we believe is real now and growing quietly among us. Peace is found neither in us nor in society, but in Jesus Christ, and where we accept him it can begin to grow in us and in the world. It is the horizon of the last day, but we already know, amidst many perplexities and mysteries, who will sit on the throne and judge us and the nations with peace and justice on that day: Jesus the wounded lamb.

A big part of the Christian life, the spiritual life is holding things together. We are interested in inner peace. We want to foster peace within the groups of which we are a part, not least the Church. Somehow we want to contribute to the peace of nations and without our own. How do we put all that together. Something similar can be found in the work of preparing leaders for the Church, in theological education. You want them to be skilled leaders in fostering peace. You want them to have hearts at peace, for how else will they be any help to anyone. You want them to be loyal and yet challenging, so that our Church will be both peaceful and alive. But how to do all that at once? How to keep all those balls in the air? It is in this regard that the following verse in our passage is most compelling: "in him, Christ, everything hold together." The coherence we seek is not found in doing all those activities. It is not found in your heart. It is not found in this congregation, though I think that all three of those - actions, heart, congregation, should be, can be, are, full of blessing and peace. It is found in Jesus Christ. In him all peace of all these kinds, peace present and future, hang together; he is the only way it can, and that is why we, and the society all around us, this and very day, so much needs our witness. Amen.