

The Prince of Peace

When we speak about ‘the Prince of Peace’ then we are thinking of a vast and wonderful realm in which there are serenity, security and tranquillity which cannot be disturbed by any invading force. This realm has been secured forever by a great and gentle monarch who maintains it thus for those who are or will become its citizens. He so reigns that its inhabitants can be assured that they have entered a haven of rest and enrichment. The promise of its kings is that they who have entered his kingdom have found rest unto their souls.

The idea of such a kingdom makes us wonder at the nature and character of its ruler. What a one he must be, to promise and achieve such a promise of rest for the souls of human beings created by him. Come that time of the year when his entry into the world of humanity is celebrated—that season we call ‘Christmas’—and we begin to think of him, the man of peace. From being eternally God he became a human being to bring peace to the troubled flesh of Man. It was prophesied of him:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this (Isa. 9:6–7).

When the evangelical prophet of Israel let that message come through from Yahweh, the God of Israel and all nations, then His people wondered at the magnitude of such words, and indeed they could not interpret them until God Himself became a man-child at Bethlehem at the beginning of our present era. How could they possibly have understood the person and character of this one who was called many names, and one of them—the one of which we speak—‘The Prince of Peace’. Through the utterance of this and other names we understand that there is that realm called ‘The Kingdom of God’ and its ruler to be would be the promised Messiah of this Isaianic prophecy along with all other such prophecies. Because he is called ‘The Prince of Peace’ it followed that ‘of peace there will be no end’. It followed that it was to be a government of peace. What a vision. Accounts of this were given elsewhere, for example, Isaiah 11:1–10.

WHAT THEN IS PEACE?

Why should there be the need of a realm of peace? Why should God become man in order to establish Man in his realm? The answer is that God did not create Man as His beloved humanity without ensuring, in the process of time, that Man should ultimately live in peace and serenity, in a kingdom unassailable by evil forces. Indeed its consummation would have to mean that evil had been banished from the creation itself.

We learn that Man—that is, the primal couple—was created in peace and structured to live in peace as his natural habitat. The garden into which the man was put and the

woman was created from him for him, was the place of utter peace. The descriptions of this original paradise—known as Eden, ‘the place of delights’—are many, and its icon seems to be innate to every person born, no matter how lacking in peace and tranquillity a man, a woman or a child may be in this life. It is a kind of Mecca to which all look, or which they seek to make for their lives in this world.

The peace of which we speak is peace of the mind and heart, of the very innermost recess of the human being. The very nature of Man requires such peace in order to be truly Man and to live out his being, not only in this world, but in that world which is yet to come. So runs the idea of Edenic happiness through peace. So the new Paradise beckons Man on to inhabit it. This is the true movement of all that we call ‘life’.

THE PEACE DISTURBED

The fall of Man is a vast subject, but it must be understood that Man’s serenity was disturbed by the father of lies, that scheming serpent whose brilliance as a spin doctor—the spin doctor—was to bring such a disturbance to the human spirit, that Man could seem to live for ever in terror or darkness of a kind which could cripple and destroy him. So powerful is the lie which is truth reversed, truth perverted to make men and women hate the God who gave them life. The history of mankind has only to be read thoughtfully and deeply to bring a person to believe that the only true God seems helpless in the face of the false god of this world called Satan, the Devil, the father of lies, the Deceiver, Accuser and many other names. It would seem it is his business to keep the soul troubled, to stir up corruption and violence and destroy the most intimate of relationships, and get humanity so fighting among itself that history seems but one unending tragedy. This is by no means the whole story, for the God who created Man had given him such reserves of resilience in himself that he could endure great disturbance and yet retain his integrity. Those who were thus minded have been called ‘the people of faith’. They know an inner peace even in the midst of the most shattering of convulsions, and persist in the hope of inheriting the ultimate kingdom of peace. Indeed, even nature shows them that it is the experience of calm and unity which the worst disasters cannot finally destroy.

The fact that God judged His creation for its foolishness and evil by visitations and with prophecies of the good ahead, so stimulated the people of faith that they looked to the coming kingdom of peace. They wrote of it and dreamed about it and it became a conviction and the basis for a wonderful hope. This helped them to endure the present disturbances and visitations of fear and anxiety and dread of evil powers. The most dreaded of all were the motions of their own hearts, the discoveries of treachery and devilment within themselves, and yet they insisted that their God was the God of all grace, and that His intention had ever been to banish that inner corruption of Man and the outer evil of Satan and his many celestial and terrestrial powers.

THE FALSE PROMISE OF PEACE

Jeremiah the prophet tells us there was a searching for peace in the Israel of his day. He was a man able to discern between true and false people. He saw the troubled heart of Man which was 'deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt'. This heart rejected God as the 'fountain of living waters' and 'hewed out cisterns that cannot hold water'. Jeremiah described their false assurances of peace, 'They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace' (Jer. 6:14; 8:11; cf. Ezek. 13:10). God has much to say concerning these false prophets. For their part the same prophets realise the power of such false promises and use them to their own benefit. Thus the politics of peace make a travesty of the true nature. The true prophets of Israel came to see that genuine peace could now come without enormous suffering—hence the emergence in thinking of 'the Suffering Servant'. His bearing the sins of the human race is described in Ephesians and Colossians where peace can only come through 'the blood of the Cross'—that inestimable suffering of one who was, and is, both God and man. Only the suffering prophet can prophesy peace.

THE COMING OF THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Against the false promise of peace there came the authentic promises and then, suddenly, the coming of the Prince of Peace. Thus it was that at a certain time in human history shepherds were watching their flocks by night on the Judean hills when the heavens burst open with a myriad of angels singing as though delirious with joy, singing of a new era come to Man. Their song was, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!' (Luke 2:14). Peace was about to come to humanity and the shepherds were told it was to come with a virgin who had conceived to bring forth what Israel knew, and the Devil knew was 'the Seed of Woman'.

This birth was the cause of an intolerable shock in the world of darkness, shock paralleling the joy of the angels and other heavenly creatures. The babe was to bring peace to the world—the fulfilment of the clear prophecies of 'the Prince of Peace'. This proved to be the case, for when he was thirty—the legitimate age to commence teaching in Israel—this young man was introduced to Israel by the prophet John, known also as John the Baptist. Not only vindicated as God's messenger by John but—even more—by the heavens opening and the Spirit of God descending upon him whilst his Father pronounced him to be His Son.

Thus he set out on the battle for peace. Peace was often his theme as the Gospels show us. His powerful invitation was, 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matt. 11:28–30). Nor were these wonderful words mere rhetoric. How often he came to deeply troubled people, so troubled that no human ability or religious ritual seemed ever to heal them. He would come to them and having ministered would say, 'Go in peace. Your faith [in God] has saved you.' These words liberated them into the kingdom of peace, otherwise known as the Kingdom of God. He would come to a woman with seven devils in her and release her from the spasmodic and horrific visitations of

these unclean spirits. He would find people laden with the guilt of their sins and would liberate them with the edict of forgiveness. He sympathised with folk bereaved and would, on occasions, bring back their loved ones to life. So, later, writers wrote of him in this way:

And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them (Matt. 4:23–24).

And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:35–36).

His Sermon on the Mount—so-called—spoke much of peace and peace making. Indeed there was to be a company of peacemakers, as indeed there had always been such, no matter how minimal these servants of reconciliation seemed to be, but this fellowship was to enlarge under the Prince of Peace. Yet none of this could properly have happened without the death of the Cross, and the consequent resurrection. It has always been that human hearts have failed themselves from much fear, and that fear of death itself is seated in the matter of human death and God’s divine judgment.

On the night of his betrayal his disciples were deeply troubled. Unable to see the outcome of an impending clash with the Jewish powers, they were in fear because he spoke of ‘my blood of the [new] covenant’. Disturbed by his discourse they were caught in their fear. Against this attitude he spoke words of comfort, ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid’ (John 14:27), and ‘Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, and will leave me alone; yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:31–33). Peace was to be wrought at great price, from ‘the beginning of sorrows’ to its triumphant end, with the cry of ‘It is finished!’ and the peaceful, ‘Into thy hands I commit my spirit’.

The Resurrection brought peace to the disciples. When he appeared to them in the upper room their hearts froze with fear. He gave the usual salutation known to all Israel, ‘Peace be with you!’ As recognition was warming they heard him repeat the salutation, and at the same time commission them to great work ahead: ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ Great peace flooded them. The Resurrection with its immense significance for all mankind was seeping through them. Now there was peace for all mankind. The massive work of the Atonement would be the basis of grace, forever.

THE MAKING OF PEACE

The making of peace during the time of Christ’s ministry was under the authority of God his Father. In John’s Gospel he constantly repeats the thought that he does nothing but

what the Father shows him and commands him. Psalm 2 is often quoted in the New Testament and it is the Messiah and Son of that Psalm which gives us understanding of what it means for Christ to be the Prince of Peace. It is primarily in the acts of the Cross that he works God's way of peace. It is to bear all the sin and pollution which is the basis and cause of God's wrath. When in Romans 1:18–32 God is said three times to have given Man up to his own sin—that is, the guilt and dynamics of evil doing—we come to realise Man's awful plight. What we might call the inner elements of guilt, such as pain and shame, the dreadful sense of pollution, the active dread and fear of judgment, the horror of one's evil, and the flooding wrath of God, the confusion and misery which invade the sinner, so that he feels the intolerable load—the burden of his sins and the inability to do anything about any such thing. It is this Christ bears in his body on the Tree—the entire iniquity of the human race, as well as the seething hatred and cruel accusation of Satan and his system which rush upon the Victim on the Cross and tell him he is all the evil of all mankind and he will go down to death, never to survive, never to rise again.

In all this the Victim bears away for ever the sin of all sinners and the dreadful power of their memory. All that separates human beings from one another. Now the way is clear to become one with all fellow creatures. Every impediment has been removed by Christ's suffering. Now the soul of any and every person may move to reconciliation with God and all fellow creatures. This is how the peace is made by the Peacemaker.

THE SCOPE OF PEACE

We have seen that a prince has a realm which he governs. The Prince of Peace reigns over his kingdom of which there is no end, to it or its unique peace. So Romans 14:17, 'For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'. All in the Kingdom may know this peace. When the gospel comes to a person then the first motions of peace are felt. The heart is released from its old burden of sin. The legalism of being justified by works of the law—that is, the law as we wrongly perceive it— gives way to the announcement of grace. Thus a person is reconciled to God, and reconciles with others. He lives in the community of communion. No place here for dissuasion, antagonism and separations.

The reconciliation spreads further. It reaches into peoples and their cultures so that enmity becomes love and nations are joined with nations, not politically, but in the Holy Spirit. The peace of God is felt as old oppositions and the very communion of the Godhead flows into the affairs of nations. Ultimately all things are reconciled (Col. 1:19–22; Eph. 2:11–18).

Does this mean, then, Satan and all his hosts are reconciled? Hardly! We read that all God's enemies will be destroyed and this goes for 'the prince of the power of the air' and his cohorts. One Greek word for 'reconciliation' has the meaning of purifying a temple. If impediments to reconciliation have to be overcome, then the work of the Cross and Resurrection will ensure that. How wide the scope for the word of the Cross, which is at the same time the word of reconciliation.

LIVING UNDER THE PRINCE OF PEACE

‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men of goodwill’. The essence of the message is that through the Saviour, God has brought peace to the world. Yet that peace comes to those who are persons ‘with whom he is pleased’. Political peace may also be in mind in an eschatological way but it is not the central drive of this pacific message. We soon see from the accounts of the Cross by the apostles that there was a work done of such dimensions in suffering as to completely and authentically reconcile men with God. It is not for us here to seek to enter into the deepest suffering of Christ in his darkest hours, and expound his bearing and suffering of the sins, pollutions, rebellions and perfidies of the Adamic and Satanic world.

How simply the peace by that blood of the Cross meets the early church where the reconciliation of God is at its most fervent action. Being reconciled, they become ambassadors of reconciliation too. Being justified by faith they and we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and have such access which itself makes them and us bold to approach God. The whole unity and communion of the Triune God—the love hierarchy of the Trinity—makes relationships in the family of God to find their life and communion in the divine archetypes, if we may use that expression. We mean that the flow of the Three Persons is into the church, the Body and Bride of Christ. It is the image of God and as such reflects the inner life of the Trinity.

This is how we must see the life of the early church. It was peaceful in relationships because it was the priesthood of all believers and the prophethood and royalty of the same. These three ministries were but the expression of Christ’s Prophethood, Priesthood and Kingship. In the life and ministry of this unique and humble community, they addressed their letters, ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’. They lived in peace even when troubles came both from within and outside. Having their feet shod with the gospel of peace, they could proceed in the most ignominious situations, as well as the most glorious. His ‘making peace by the blood of his cross’, they knew peace as a fruit of the Spirit, along with the other virtues. Having no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, they let their requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding, kept their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION: ‘KEEP THE PEACE’

In Israel’s economy it was the high priest who gave the Aaronic blessing that we know so well, ‘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’ (Num. 6:24–26). In the church the true High Priest is Christ himself, and so the church lives under his blessing, yet so much so is that priestly presence that all are priestly, together, and all bless all. So it is we see the true being of ‘the Prince of Peace,’ and the realm of his presence as having no end, for it is the very Kingdom of God.

With this in mind, then, and the Season of the Nativity around us when God became Man, we may aptly close with the blessing of Hebrews 13:20–21:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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