

## THE PEACE WE LONG FOR, THE PEACE GOD BRINGS

Isaiah 11:1–10; Romans 15:4–13; Matthew 3:1–12

Today we lit the Advent candle of Peace.

And if we're brutally honest, peace feels like a very fragile word in a world like ours.

We long for peace in our homes, peace in our communities, peace in our hearts.

We long for peace in a world that feels stretched, anxious, and unable to broker peace. We only need to think of Russia, the Ukraine, Israel & her Arab neighbours, the African conflicts, the tensions in Asia and in the NATO countries.

We all want peace, but the Scripture readings today don't give us a soft, sentimental peace. They give us a peace that is bold, disruptive, and transforming. A peace that comes at a cost.

Advent peace is not the peace of escape. It is the peace of God breaking into the world as it is — and making things new.

### In our first reading from Isaiah 11 — Peace Grows from What Looks Dead

Isaiah begins with a stump. A kingdom cut down. A people discouraged. A future that looks like it has been reduced to nothing. And then —

*“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.”*

Peace begins in unlikely places. Peace begins where we thought nothing good could grow. Peace begins when God breathes life into what we have written off.

Isaiah's vision is not just personal peace. It is cosmic peace which affects all creation. Wolves and lambs living together. Children playing safely where danger once lurked. The earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

Isaiah invites us to imagine a world / a creation made new.

This is the peace we call '**shalom**' — the peace of a world transformed by God's justice and God's Spirit.

Isaiah reminds us: Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is the creative presence of God in the world bringing new things out of the old. New growth out of old stumps.

## **In our second reading from Romans 15 — Peace comes in the form of Reconciliation Between Peoples.**

Paul writes to a divided church — Jews and Gentiles struggling to live together. And he says:

“Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.”

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.”

Peace here is relational. It is the peace of a community learning to live together across differences. It is the peace of people who discover that Christ has made them one family despite their differences.

Paul quotes Isaiah 11 directly — reminding us that the Messiah’s peace is not just for individuals, but for the whole creation and the whole people of God.

Peace is not uniformity. Peace is unity in Christ, where Christ accepts the difference in all people and all cultures and brings them all together in his body, the Church.

This is a word for our families, our churches, our communities — where reconciliation is always the work of the Spirit.

## **In our Gospel reading from Matthew 3 — We see that Peace Requires Preparation**

John the Baptist arrives on the scene — not with gentle words, but with fire in his voice.

“Prepare the way of the Lord.” “Repent.” “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

At first glance, John doesn’t sound like peace at all. But John is telling the truth that we often avoid: There can be no peace without repentance.

We cannot receive the peace of Christ while clinging to the habits that destroy peace.

We cannot welcome the Prince of Peace while holding onto bitterness, injustice, or self-centredness.

John is not threatening us. He is clearing the ground. He is pruning away what cannot bear the weight of God’s peace.

Advent peace is not passive. It is the peace that comes when we make room for God to transform us.

## **When we hold these 3 readings together, a single message rises:**

**Peace is the result of God’s just, Spirit-filled reign breaking into the world — and our willingness to prepare room for it.**

Isaiah shows us peace as a new creation.

Paul in Romans shows us peace as reconciliation.

In our gospel lesson, John shows us peace as repentance.

John the Baptist has always fascinated me.

In the gospels, (and in paintings), John is always depicted as a lonely hermit, living in the desert, surviving on locusts and wild honey. His hair and beard are uncombed and scruffy. He wears uncomfortable camel-hair clothing, a leather belt around his waist, and a rough pair of sandals made for the desert.

He is not the Biblical equivalent of a Green Party member on a paleo diet living in Ponsonby or Island Bay.

In fact John scorned politicians of his day – spoke the truth to power (which cost him his life) and he scorned people who lived in luxury. And when he saw the wealthy priests and merchants coming to be baptised, he called them a ‘brood of vipers’ - comparing their colourful robes to the shiny skin of desert snakes.

John was probably a Nazarite – (See Numbers 6: 1-21). Someone sworn off drinking alcohol, and having sexual relations. The Nazarites were also forbidden to touch dead bodies - or cut their hair - until the period of their vows had ended.

Some of them, despite their rough appearance, were also obsessed with purity and cleanliness - and would bathe frequently in a kind of ritual cleansing – like a daily baptism.

Despite his austere lifestyle, John managed to gather a community of like-minded people around him, who became his disciples.

It is quite possible that Jesus began his ministry as one of John’s disciples and may have been a Nazarite for a time. Andrew, John the son of Zebedee and Phillip were also former disciples of John Baptist.

**We can see from the gospels, that John saw something special in Jesus and that John preferred to serve Jesus rather than the other way around.**

John pointed to Jesus as, ‘The Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world....and he said of Jesus, ‘he comes before me’ and ‘I am not worthy to untie his sandals...’

**Communities like John’s community were not unusual.** The Essenes is another well-documented community (of that time), that had similar habits and beliefs to John’s baptizing community.

**What is so enigmatic about John, is that his ascetic, austere lifestyle betrayed the fact that John was actually brought up in relative luxury.**

He was the son of a temple priest named Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth - both of whom belonged to the priestly aristocracy.

So, here we have this austere figure of a man, a hermit, wearing camel hair garments – a leather girdle and sandals, living on insects and wild honey.

A man rejecting the world of wealth and comfort, rejecting the world of his parents, calling on the world to repent, and pointing to Jesus as the Promised Messiah who would usher in a new age.

John is not the only well-known figure of history who rejected his old comfortable life to go in search of peace in the wilderness.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century American writer Henry Thoreau wrote his famous book ‘On Walden Pond’ about his retreat into the American wilderness to find clarity and peace.

Thoreau gave his reason for going into the wilderness:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

Figures closer to home have sought the same solitude, for much the same reasons as John the Baptist and Henry Thoreau.

Rua Kenana, a Maori prophet of peace, established the separated community of Maungapohatu to get away from intertribal rivalry and government interference – before his community was invaded by government forces. The Presbyterian Church of NZ through the missionary Rev John Laughton, has enjoyed a special relationship with Rua’s Ringatu Church established by Te Kooti, another prophet of peace.

James K Baxter rejected the materialism of his middle-class professional life as a journalist and writer, to live in a Christian commune – which he called Jerusalem – built near the Whanganui River. Like John the Baptist, he devoted himself to a life of austerity and spirituality.

Perhaps our most well-known Kiwi, Sir Edmund Hillary, sought solace and quiet among the Sherpa communities of the Himalayas. He found peace by living among the Sherpas and trying to improve their lives. It became his lifelong obsession.

**Why do so many Kiwis love the sea, the mountains and bush? All places of peace and solitude. Places of healing and renewal.**

In a few weeks’ time many of us will be going to our favourite holiday spots to rediscover the peace and the solitude and the healing we need after another busy year.

## What Does Peace Look Like for Us?

What does this peace look like in our lives?

In our homes it might mean: Choosing gentleness over reaction. Listening before speaking. Forgiving before resentment takes root.

In our community it could mean: Standing with those who are vulnerable. Working for fairness and justice. Being people of integrity and compassion.

In our relationships it could mean, seeking reconciliation where there has been hurt. Letting go of what we cannot control. Making space for healing.

In our inner life it could mean: Allowing God to prune what needs to go. Letting the Spirit breathe hope into the stumps of our lives. Trusting that Christ is already at work in us.

In our church: Becoming a sign of the peace God intends for the world — a community where justice, welcome, and reconciliation are lived out.

Christ invites to enjoy his peace. He says to you and to me:

*My peace I give to you. My peace I leave with you. Not as the world gives, do I give to you.*

Are we ready to receive Christ's peace? Are we preparing our hearts to receive his peace in this Advent-Christmas season?

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

## **PRAYER**

God of hope and holiness,  
you raise up a righteous branch from Jesse's root  
and call us through prophets to prepare the way of your kingdom.  
Grant that, having heard your Word,  
we may bear fruit worthy of repentance,  
live together in harmony,  
and abound in joy and peace by the power of your Spirit.  
Through Jesus Christ, who baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit,  
and who lives and reigns with you and the same Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. **Amen**