

Isaiah 11:1-10 – A world at peace

Longing for world peace

I don't know whether you watch beauty contests? They often included a brief interview with the contestants in which they might ask what they most wanted in the world. It's a bit of a cliché, but, in my memory, many of them seem to have answered, "World peace."

I grew up as a teenager in the 1960s – it seems a long time ago now. The hippy movement and flower power were, in part, a reaction to the tensions of the cold war and the war in Vietnam. It sought to celebrate peace and harmony. Burt Bacharach and the Carpenters were singing "What the world needs now is love sweet love; it's the only thing that there's just too little of."

But the idealism which believed it could transform the world seems to have been buried in the dust of the falling twin towers and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; to have given way to despair with the failure of the Arab Spring, the rise of IS and the devastatingly destructive war in Syria. And then there is the perennial and seemingly insoluble Palestinian 'problem'. On top of all this, the nuclear threat which filled us with fear in the 1960s has returned with new terrors now that nations such as North Korea have nuclear arms.

The longing for world peace remains as real but elusive as ever.

A kingdom that had known peace

Nor were things so very different in Isaiah's day.

The Israelites knew that they had a glorious history. Under the rule of King David, all of their enemies had been conquered. David was able to pass on to his son, Solomon, a kingdom at peace.

And Solomon was a man filled with wisdom from God. Under his reign the temple was built in Jerusalem, a glorious symbol of God's presence with his people. It seemed as if the Kingdom of God had arrived on earth. We read in 1 Kings 4:24-25,

Solomon ruled over all the land west of the Euphrates River, from Tiphshah on the Euphrates as far west as the city of Gaza. All the kings west of the Euphrates were subject to him, and he was at peace with all the neighbouring countries. As long as he lived, the people throughout Judah and Israel lived in safety, each family with its own grapevines and fig trees.

What a wonderful picture of a society living at peace and enjoying peace and wellbeing.

But cracks were already visible in the kingdom of those whom God had called to be his own. Solomon had married foreign wives who had turned his heart away from God, and the kings who followed him were worse still. Soon there was war, even war between the breakaway northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah – brother fighting brother.

In the days of Isaiah the northern kingdom was destroyed by the mighty empire of Assyria, leaving only the southern kingdom of Judah to whom Isaiah was sent as a prophet. And Isaiah was sent to warn Judah that their rebellion against God meant that they too were to face his judgment. Their rebellion was evident in the way they treated one another, particularly their lack of concern for the poor. God was going to send them off into captivity in Babylon.

The Jews were facing war and destruction. Would they ever again experience the days of peace and prosperity which they looked back to with longing?

God's promise of a new King

In Isaiah 11, the prophet brings them a word of promise and of hope:

¹ The royal line of David is like a tree that has been cut down; but just as new branches sprout from a stump, so a new king will arise from among David's descendants.

Kingship in Israel has become like a rotten tree-stump, lacking the glory of the former tree and any life or vitality. But God promises that another king will be raised up from David's descendants who will be David's greater Son.

² The spirit of the LORD will give him wisdom
and the knowledge and skill to rule his people.

He will know the LORD's will and honour him,

³ and find pleasure in obeying him.

This king will be filled with wisdom by the Spirit of the living God: he will be greater than Solomon. And he will rule over his people in obedience to God – he will please God. Just as the disobedience of the kings has brought God's judgment upon his people, so the obedience of this king will bring peace to his people.

He will not judge by appearance or hearsay;

⁴ he will judge the poor fairly
and defend the rights of the helpless.

At his command the people will be punished,
and evil persons will die.

⁵ He will rule his people with justice and integrity.

He will destroy all that threatens his people and will usher in a kingdom marked by peace and justice.

And this peace and justice shall then characterise the whole of creation:

⁶ Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,
and leopards will lie down with young goats.

Calves and lion cubs will feed together,
and little children will take care of them.

⁷ Cows and bears will eat together,
and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace.

Lions will eat straw as cattle do.

⁸ Even a baby will not be harmed
if it plays near a poisonous snake.

⁹ On Zion, God's sacred hill,
there will be nothing harmful or evil.

The land will be as full of knowledge of the LORD
as the seas are full of water.

The whole of creation is pictured here as transformed and renewed; no longer red in tooth and claw but living in peace. It is like Eden restored as creation itself is filled with the presence and knowledge of God.

Nor are these blessings to be enjoyed only by the Jews; it will flow to all the nations of the world.

¹⁰ A day is coming when the new king from the royal line of David will be a symbol to the nations. They will gather in his royal city and give him honour.

This wonderful king which God will raise up will bring healing to the nations. He will bring in world peace as it has never been known before, as it can only be dreamed of.

What a wonderful vision. Those to whom Isaiah brought this message must have longed for this king to arrive – longed to experience the peace described in this prophecy.

But who could ever fulfil this prophetic vision?

Jesus, the Prince of Peace

We know that Isaiah was prophesying about the Lord Jesus Christ. He is David's greater Son and the one possessed of a greater wisdom than Solomon. He is the King of the Jews; the one come to establish the kingdom of God. He is the one who has come, as the angels declared, to bring peace on earth.

Through his death on the cross, his triumphant resurrection and his presence for us at God's right hand in glory, Jesus has reconciled us to God and given us peace with God. And as the apostle Paul reminds us both in Romans 15:4-13 that was read to us and in his own ministry to the Gentiles, Jesus came to break down the divisive walls that separate people from one another – Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor – and to create a people who live as peace with one another – a forgiven and forgiving people. Love – transforming love – came down at Christmas.

A world still awaiting transformation

But still we live in a world marked by conflict, warfare, misery and destruction. Still we long for that promised age of peace – as described in this well-known Christmas Carol:

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold!
Peace on the earth, good will to men,
From heaven's all gracious King!
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing...

Yet with the woes of sin and strife,
The world hath suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled,
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not,
The love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.

For lo the days are hastening on,
By prophet bards foretold,
When, with the ever-circling years,
Shall come the Age of Gold;
When peace shall over all the earth,
Its ancient splendours fling,
And all the world give back the song,
Which now the angels sing.

Advent Hope

During this period of Advent we remember how God's people longed for and waited for the coming of the Messiah – the one who came on that first Christmas morning. And we now long and wait for his second coming.

We rejoice that we, even now, enjoy peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ – we are filled with joy and peace through faith in him.

But we look for and long for the day of his return, knowing that he alone can heal the wounds of this troubled and warring world; he alone can make all things new. We long for the day when all that is spoken of in this beautiful prophetic picture will be fully realised – for the day when war will be no more; when there will be no more death, no more suffering, no more tears. We long for that day.

And in the meantime we prepare for the day of his coming by living at peace with others, by praying that peace to come to our troubled world and by seeking to be peace-makers wherever we can – seeking to be like Christ, the Prince of Peace.

And we also seek to take every opportunity, and especially the season of Christmas, to share with others the good news that Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, has come and that he shall come again to make all things new.

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