

## God is with us in peace- or is He?- Address.

I'd like to introduce you to another item from the ever growing nativity sets in the Logan household. This is a Russian doll 'version' of the characters of the Christmas story. Reveal a layer at a time, first the kings with their three gifts, then Joseph, followed by Mary, then an angel and finally the baby Jesus himself. You may wonder what happened to the shepherds. In this one the shepherds do not feature, as they have their own festival in the orthodox church.

The Christmas story is a little like this Russian doll. There are many layers to the story and you can reveal so much about the God who came to earth in exploring these layers, but more than that you can truths about then and now; truths about the past and truths about today.

Today we are exploring the idea that God is with us in Peace On one layer this idea troubles me a little. How can we say that God is with us in Peace when so many not at peace?:

1. How can we say that God is with us in peace when there are more than 40 recognised conflicts going on in the world at the moment and so much political unrest?
2. How can we say that God is with us in peace when over 14 million (and growing numbers of people) are in poverty in this country and this includes over 4 million children.<sup>1</sup> Since the pandemic these figures are rising. That's not the peace I want, where people go to bed hungry, where parents do not know where the next meal is coming from. This was recently brought to the forefront when Marcus Rashford, the footballer took on the government and shamed them into extending free school meal provision into the holidays. The amazing work of Action for Children which we have also heard about supports children and sticks up for them even when they seem to have been denied the childhood every child should have.

The Trussell Trust alone support over 1200 foodbanks and that is in addition to the many other groups and churches providing foodbanks. The Trussell Trust one of the few organisations whose main aim is to do themselves out of a job! The Storehouse we have just heard about being one of those. How can we say that God is with us in peace when poverty is rife in this world?

3. How can we say that God is with us in peace when It is estimated that **1 in 6** people in the past week experienced a common mental health problem<sup>2</sup> and that figure has grown significantly during the pandemic. Where our society has become self-obsessed with productivity and outcomes, whatever the human cost. I hear story after story of people who are now expected to work longer hours as they are working from home, of people over stressed and worried about losing their job. The great advances in supporting people's mental well being seem to be being ignored at this time. This is the breeding ground of anxiety and depression. How can we say that God is with us in peace when so many people are not at peace with themselves?
4. How can we say that God is with us in peace and then turn our backs by destroying the world he has given us in trust and as a direct result making the world's poorest of people even poorer. We have all witnessed the dramatic changes that came to the environment during lockdown. It gave us a glimpse of what could be possible of a new way. Sadly, predictions that we will return to our old polluting ways. How can we be at peace with this?

How can we believe that God is with us in peace? The clue, I believe, is to be found in a a middle eastern woman who over 2000 years ago. A woman who had a visit from an angel which changed her life forever. She spoke of this transforming, redemptive experience with the following words:

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons library- Poverty statistics in the uk

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-uk-and-worldwide>

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Notice this: he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Later Mary elaborates:

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

What is a lowly person?<sup>3</sup>

*Definition of **lowly** 1 : humble in manner or spirit : free from self-assertive pride.*

*2 : not lofty or sublime :*

*prosaic.*

*3 : ranking low in some hierarchy.*

*4 : of or relating to a low social or economic rank.*

So what about Mary? Mary is so often depicted as a passive figure who sits benignly holding the baby Jesus in a stable surrounded by Joseph, (who is always taller than her!) animals, shepherds kings and of course a heavenly host of angels! But the truth would be very different. A mother at this time, would need to be part of the fight for survival. There were no supermarkets or take-aways! There was no first century version of McDonalds or Costa! Also there was no welfare state, no hospitals or medical treatment, no foodbanks, no ‘Shelter project’ to give them a bed for the night and a hot meal. They were own their own. They to fight for their survival and Mary would not have the luxury to be able to sit benignly and serenely as we so often she is predicted to have been. Mary had just travelled a long distance, given birth in a dirty and unhygienic stable. She would have been tired, exhausted and yet still she needed to protect and cherish this tiny baby. You have also need to remember that is was not very long before Mary, Joseph and Jesus fled to Egypt as refugees to avoid almost certain death. It’s true, he could have been one of the many thousands on one of those boats trying to come to this country to leave behind their horrific situations. Perhaps the next time you hear someone say disparaging comments about refugees you might remind them that Jesus was also a refugees and our whole faith is based on the story of a refugee family!

Mary was a lowly person. She was most likely poor. She was a young Jewish girl, she was probably illiterate. We know this from observations of modern day so- called ‘peasant communities’ which still exist in some parts of the world. Women in these communities tend to have very low levels of literacy .<sup>4</sup> Yet Mary was a woman of deep faith with the capacity to take on the most challenging of tasks. For it was Mary who partnered with God in the work of the redemption of the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Miriam Webster

<sup>4</sup> Mary C.Grey- The Advent of Peace

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Just like the prophet Isaiah thousands of years earlier she was caught up in the task of bringing change into the world:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour...<sup>5</sup>*

Notice how active it is. There is a real purpose to this message. There is nothing passive about this. Notice the way it is written:

*'he has sent me'  
'to bind up'  
'to proclaim'  
'and release'*

There is nothing, 'sit back and see what happens' about this. Everything in it speaks of action.

Step forward 2000+ years.

You would be forgiven for saying that nothing has changed much. It is true that there are still wars in the world, poverty in the world, people who need to flee their homeland with the hope of surviving. Human trafficking is a scourge on our society and we continue to destroy the earth that God has given us. So how can justice be done and peace be known in our time?

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

— **Teresa of Avila (16<sup>th</sup> Century)**

The word peace in the New Testament is from the Greek word *eiréné* (i-ray'-nay). According to Strong's Concordance, *eiréné* means one, peace, quietness, and rest. It originates from the root word *eirō*, which means to join, or tie together into a whole. *eiréné* means unity; it is bringing multiple parts together to form a whole, or set it was one again. For example, two friends who reconcile after a fight make *eiréné*, that is they come back together, and their relationship is whole. You see God is with us in peace: creating unity, making sure that what is unjust in our world is put right, tied together in a whole. Peace/ *eiréné* means using

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 61.1-2a

our hands/ our feet/our eyes /our bodies to bring about the kingdom of peace that Jesus came to proclaim—using everything we possess to ‘lift the lowly’, to right the wrongs around us.

Now that is a huge challenge to us, particularly as we are struggling to find our way through such a difficult time. But that is what we are called to work for peace, a peace that unites, not divides:

- a peace that delivers justice for the people who are caught in conflict and war, refugees
- a peace that rights wrongs
- a peace that unites us together to bring an end to poverty and levelling up of the playing field
- a peace that helps those struggling with mental health issues to find a deep and lasting sense of unity and peace
- a peace that protects our climate and puts right the wrongs we have done to our world.

We have just sung the carol ‘As with gladness men of old’ written by Edmund Sears in 1849 whilst struggling with his own significant mental health issues, and with news of revolution in Europe and the United States' war with Mexico fresh in his mind, Sears portrayed the world as dark, full of "sin and strife", and not hearing the Christmas message, but also speaks of peace:

*For lo!, the days are hastening on,  
By prophet bards foretold,  
When with the ever-circling years  
Comes round the age of gold  
When peace shall over all the earth  
Its ancient splendours fling,  
And the whole world give back the song  
Which now the angels sing.*

My prayer is that we can all work ‘to give back the song which now the angels sing’.

The song that Mary sang 2000 years ago has been rewritten

My soul sings in gratitude.

I’m dancing in the mystery of God.

The light of the Holy One is within me

and I am blessed, so truly blessed.

This goes deeper than human thinking.

I am filled with awe

at Love whose only condition

is to be received.

The gift is not for the proud,

for they have no room for it.

The strong and self-sufficient ones

don't have this awareness.

But those who know their emptiness

can rejoice in Love's fullness.

It's the Love that we are made for,

the reason for our being.

It fills our inmost heart space

and brings to birth in us, the Holy One.

*from John Shelby Spong's website "A New Christianity for A New World" 19 Dec 2007*