

WBC 16 May 2004

The Dream of Peace

A sermon by Geoff Wraight

Text: John 14:23-29, Acts 16:9-15

I had a dream the other night...(and as with most dreams there was a mix of fact and fiction in this one)

I dreamt that woke and opened the newspaper to read the following report.

“John Latham the new radical Prime minister and leader of the Dream of Peace Party and his Treasurer Simon Costello last night brought down the new budget for 2005 including 12 billion dollars of new spending based on the projected surplus for the year. Of course, this budget precedes the introduction of a new tax system that abolishes the GST, and fully funds recurrent spending and balanced budgets through a vigorous and progressive flat income tax in which every person in the nation contributes a fixed percentage of their gross income or company profits including the wealthiest 10%.

The new spending included the funding of the following programs...

Recognizing that while poverty does not lead directly to terrorism, poverty leads to loss of hope, which is a fertile breeding ground for terrorist networks. The government will spend an extra 1.2 billion dollars over the next 3 years (a full tithing of the surplus) in a progressive program to gradually increase foreign aid to .7 per cent of Gross national income. This aid will be directed to sustainable development in some of the poorest nations on the planet and a significant contribution to the Millennium Development Goals, the internationally endorsed platform for halving poverty by 2015.

Realizing that overwhelming majority of refugees that settle in Australia begin to contribute to the nation's economy within a very short space of time after arriving here, Australia will honour its commitment to addressing the problem of 20million refugees worldwide by increasing its quotas of intake to 10,000 per year. This will be in conjunction with overseas programs that work toward eliminating people smuggling by providing real places for refugees in the war-torn places from which they come. This will be funded by the millions saved from closing down the so called Pacific Solution and releasing children and families from from detention centres. The cost will 500 million dollars per year on top of current spending.

Instead of spending 13 million dollars on an advertising campaign against the Kyoto Protocol on Greenhouse gas emissions, the government will ratify the agreement and commit Australia to reducing its greenhouse emissions (which are currently the highest per capita in the world - 25% higher than emissions per person in the USA.) The Government will commit 2 billion dollars over

the next three years to renewable energy research including the funding of several operating solar power stations which will contribute to the national grid and create hundreds of new jobs. It will also spend 500 million dollars per year on community education and development programs such as Sustainability Street (or similar) aimed at bringing local people together in neighbourhoods to learn and practice sustainable lifestyle choices and minimizing use of water and energy in their homes.

Realizing that the spiritual health and identity of our nation is dependent on the recognition and healing of the dispossession and disadvantage of our indigenous peoples, the government will commit a billion dollars to reconciliation and education programs. It will establish a department for reconciliation and a national day of healing and thanksgiving. It will fully address the recommendations of the Bringing them Home report and fund more programs that help stolen children to be re-united with their families and culture. New schools and health centres will be established in many remote communities costing 900 million dollars over three years.

Addressing the issue of family relationships, the government will commit 1 billion dollars over three years to establishing the new "Meet your Parents" program. This is a scheme where parents who reduce their working time per week to 38 hours will have any lost income compensated by 50% if they can prove that they are spending the increased time at home playing with their kids and talking to each other.

The government will also match contributions on 20c/dollar basis to autonomous churches and faith community groups who are committed to regular Sabbath keeping and spiritual nurture. (costing 600 million dollars). Further programs will be funded addressing local community building through employment programs, low-cost housing and youth mentoring programs costing 500 million dollars per year for three years.

Other spending was also announced for new schools, affordable university places and health promotion that actively and effectively shifts the balance of wealth more evenly across the ever increasing gap between rich and poor.

The national reaction to this new way of spending the surplus was overwhelmingly positive and matched the recent polls indicating that over 70% of Australians would prefer more spending on services, health and education rather than tax cuts and cash handouts...."

Visions and dreams of peace – are they just wishful thinking or can they be based on something real that actually gives hope and inspires us to action...

The idea of peace in the bible is much greater than simply the absence of war. As we have often reflected, the OT idea of "Shalom" is about peacefulness, completeness, tranquillity, safety, well-being, wholeness in body and mind, and justice.

The dream of peace is timeless and universal. The Christian Message, the good news of Jesus - is that in faith we can ground our hopes for peace in the reality of God - peace is God's dream, too.

It is this background that I think sheds light on the text we have read that comes from the so-called farewell discourse in John's Gospel.

25 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. **27Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.**

I do not give to you as the world gives.

In John's community, the Christian community around 100AD to whom this gospel was written the word and greeting of shalom – peace would have been well known.

Most scholars agree from the historical evidence from the period that John was a Jewish Christian leader who wrote for a Jewish Christian Community that was in conflict with the synagogue authorities of its day. Followers of Jesus were being regularly kicked out of the synagogues – it cost something to be a Christian jew and there was probably a growing sense that things were going from bad to worse – life was tough and it was hard to feel confident that things were going to get better.

The Hebrew greeting Shalom would have been well known to John's hearers. They most likely would hear it every day from the mouths of Jewish religious leaders and in their own greetings. It had perhaps lost some of its original meaning in the same way as when we say, "Hello, how are you?" To which and honest answer is not required in fact the opposite in that even if we are feeling like proverbial excrement – we answer "Fine thanks". So Shalom – yeah Shalom to you too!!

But Jesus is saying much more than a trite farewell to the disciples here he is saying that they will not be alone, they will not be left as orphans, because they will live in the peace of Jesus. This is not the empty promise of peace or security they hear thrown around, nor the end of conflict. This peace is the peace he gives, a peace that derives from the heart of Jesus' life. The peace of Jesus is the all embracing sphere of his life, his love, his joy. He is promise no less than the hopes and dreams of Israel as they would have understood in the tradition of Shalom and rest.

The promise of peace here is a powerful idea that promises something transforming in the practice of Christian faith and discipleship. Let me mention just three characteristics of this vision of peace that I think are important..

1. True peace is a vision that does not deny pain

Jesus does not promise that there will be no conflict or hardship. But he does promise that the peace he gives will enable the community to not be afraid. That is not to live

in fear or out of fear. Much of the talk in our country at the moment and many of the current government policies in relation to Iraq, terrorism, and refugees are based on irrational fears. We operate in a mindset of what could happen if we were to let refugees take over our country or let terrorists hide a bomb under every rock and bridge. In fact, you are many many times more likely to be killed on the bridge (the Westgate that is) by just driving over it than you are by a terrorist.

I suggest that this kind of thinking is actually a way of trying to deny reality rather than live in a balanced way. It is a way that paints personal and national security in a reactionary, eliminate all possibilities of danger and risk, sort of way.

It is a false peace.

The peace in Jesus vision is that which embraces hope in the midst of conflict. That acknowledges pain yet sees hope and acts in love.

I was talking with someone just the other day who described a time recently when they felt just overwhelmed as they thought about all the emotional pain and concealed sorrow that surrounds us every day. That it was like being caught in a giant whirlpool of angst that is slowly but ultimately dragging you to the ultimate reality of death.

I can identify with this feeling at times.

But the Christian message, Jesus vision of peace is just the opposite to this. That the ultimate reality is not death or despair but love. Christian faith in its essence is acting in that truth that the ultimate reality is - we are not alone.

*We are not alone,
we live in God's world.*

*We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the
Spirit.*

*We trust in God.
We are called to be the Church:*

*to celebrate God's presence,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus,
crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.*

*We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.*

And it was a one faith community member to another that this was shared as a message of hope. Which brings me to the second characteristic.

2. True peace is a vision nurtured in worship

The farewell discourse of which these words of Jesus are a part is set in the context of the Passover meal – the equivalent setting found in the other Gospels where Jesus institutes the last supper. It is around the table that the roots of Christian worship are established and it is around this table in the context of celebratory feast – the gathering of believers, that Jesus’ words of peace are given.

The Christian practice of Sabbath keeping and gathered worship is a central part of maintaining the vision of peace...

Let me share with you a few words about this from the practicing our faith book..

Describe church from Practicing Faith book.. p87-88

It is about taking part in the activity by which God is shaping a new creation.

This is my vision of worship here at Westgate – and I think we can achieve it.

Finally

3. True peace is a vision evidenced in practice. Acts 16 reading – finding Lydia

While inner peace is indeed part of the promise and hope of Christian faith, it is far more than just a warm fuzzy feeling inside that we are talking about. We have seen that vision of peace is not about denying reality, it is the active hope and purpose by which we live out our faith in the daily circumstances of our lives.

It is not by accident that this passage is linked with the story in Acts about Lydia that forms part of the lection for today.

Acts 16: 9-15

.....One night Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man urgently beckoning him from across the sea and calling, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

.....The vision confirmed to us that God was calling us to expand our horizons into Europe and to preach the good news there. We immediately began making inquiries about booking our passage across. We managed to get berths on a ship sailing from Troas. It made a direct run for Samothrace, and then on to Neapolis the next day. From there we took the road inland to the Roman garrison-town of Philippi. Philippi is a major regional city in that part of Macedonia, and we stayed there for several days.

.....We heard that there was a spot on the riverside just outside the city where people gathered for prayer, so on the Sabbath day we went down there. A group of women gathered there and we sat and talked with them for some time.

Among those who were keen to hear what we had to say was a woman named

Lydia from the city of Thyatira. She was a worshipper of God and ran a business dealing in top-quality textiles. The Lord gave her an open heart and mind and she responded eagerly to the message Paul shared with them. She and her whole household were subsequently baptised. She put the hard word on us, saying, “If you think my faith in the Lord is for real, then come and stay in my home for a few days.”

.....We hadn't been planning to stay, but she talked us into it.

What I love about this story and much of the activity of the church planters in Acts, is the simple practicality and ordinariness of their activity. How did the good news spread? Well in this case by the finding of Lydia – a woman of faith. They went out expecting to find people whom God had already touched, in whom the spirit of God was active in planting the seeds of faith and the vision of peace.

What is significant about this?

Simply that the church will grow when we seek out the people of peace – when we cooperate actively with the vision of peace that God is actively planting among real people in real situations.

And where will we find these people? In our neighbourhood, yes. In our workplaces, yes. In the market places yes.

Where is the mission of the local church embodied? It is embodied in our lives the daily ordinary lives of people who share a common vision of peace? It is embodied in our joyful worship as we gather to rest and share the dream. The formation of our faith does not just happen in church or in some activity of the church. It happens in the going out and coming in each week.

Try going to your workplace or daily activities this week with an expectant heart.

Look for and seek to fan into flame the vision of peace that God is planting. Cooperate with it and stand against the spirit of death where you can. Then come back again to share your story as we strengthen our partnership with God in bringing these dreams to life.

Let us continue to dream the dream of peace, in the struggle of life, in the act of worship, and in the living out of our faith every day.