

“PEACE?”

Romans 5:1-11

We live in a wonderful world. There is around us so much beauty and awe-inspiring grandeur, so much colour and variety, so much that astonishes and amazes us. Look at the documentaries of David Attenborough and the photographs that adorn calendars and travel brochures and guidebooks. As many of us have a bit more time at the moment to enjoy the world around us, you may have been able to appreciate just what’s around us here in this part of the world – the bright spring greens along the local towpaths, the distant splendour of the Peak District hills, the brilliance of the flower beds in Beacon Park, the colour and variety in your own garden. What a wonderful world!

And yet it is a world peopled by men and women who seem constantly to be at loggerheads with each other. Brought into our homes by the television news, the Internet, social media and newspapers are accounts of a fragmented and antagonistic society. Even at this time, daily bulletins bring stories of sharp divisions, harsh words and hasty actions. Today we remember the coming of peace at the end of the Second World War in Europe, but that other side of life has always been lurking somewhere or other, and currently we still see conflict in stark relief on the Turkish/Syrian border, in the cartel controlled villages of Mexico and Colombia, amongst the rubble of Yemen – even, just last week, on the de-militarised zone between North and South Korea. In recent times we’ve seen it even closer to home – in the chambers of the European Council and Parliament, and in our own House of Commons, and behind the closed doors in many of our towns and cities. And it’s very much there in our own families and workplaces and friendship groups. We still live in a world in deep need of reconciliation.

And St Paul, writer of so much of our New Testament, mentions it so often in his letters – letters to churches and Christians who, like us today, experienced the difficulties and the pain of broken relationships and fragmented communities. Whether he was writing about entire churches that were being ripped apart by false teaching and opposing leaders, or – as in his *Letter to the Philippians* – to two old saints who just didn’t seem to be able to get on, Paul is desperately keen to stress that what he is about – what we’re about as followers of Jesus – is, as he tells the Corinthian Christians, a “*ministry of reconciliation*”, helping people to discover real peace, as Lee was talking about in that little clip just now.

And in the words we’ve just heard, writing to the Christians in Rome, the city at the heart of the Empire, Paul writes about the problem that is at the very heart of our relationships, the reason our world is such a fractured and divided place. This is all about the broken relationship between us and God – and what God has done to try and resolve it. And as with everything that concerns our relationship with God and

with each other, at the centre of it all is Jesus. It is through Jesus that God has provided a way out of the mess in which we find ourselves, has given us the opportunity to rediscover a sense of peace.

Let's go back to the beginning for a moment. However you believe he did it, God created this world, caused it to come into being. And it was a perfect world in the sense that it was just as God intended it to be. All those things we mentioned just now – the beauty and order and variety – flowed from his creative imagination and formed the world just as he wanted. It was amazing! And into that world – again, however you believe he did it – God put human beings, men and women who would share with him the task of looking after it and enjoying all that it had to offer. God's relationship with humanity was such that he spoke to them directly and even – somehow – seemed to walk with them through it. That was the original goodness of this astonishing creation.

But then evil found its way in. Somehow, things went wrong and the ability God had given human beings to make decisions and to choose what they were going to do ended up being used to make the wrong decisions, wrong choices – choices that were for short-term gain and quick individual satisfaction, rather than for the long-term good of all. That had a profound effect on the relationship that men and women had with their God and the repercussions were felt throughout creation. From that point on things went downhill and God's perfect creation was spoiled by suffering, inequality, greed, selfishness – and, with alarming regularity, war. Within that creation, humanity began to experience a lack of fulfilment – after, all, they were no longer doing what God had created them to do – a deep dissatisfaction with life – as they couldn't re-connect with God if they wanted to – and a hopelessness about the immediate and, more particularly, the eternal future as they could no longer be assured of spending eternity with God in his perfect creation, in his Kingdom.

Of course, that was never God's intention. He hadn't wanted things to develop this way. He still loved his world and especially human beings. He wanted us to connect with him again, to enjoy his creation, to feel secure in our relationship with him. And, I suppose, at a very profound level we wanted that too. Part of our restlessness and dissatisfaction with life is born of the need to be reconciled to God as he originally intended. Part of our fear of death is the awareness, at a subconscious level, that we will have to encounter God again one day and give an account of why we've lived as we have. As the writer of the Old Testament book of *Ecclesiastes* puts it, "*God has set eternity in people's hearts*".

But, sadly, we couldn't do anything about that. Such is the nature of the rift between us and God that it's not within our ability to reach out to him. We were, as Paul puts it here "*still powerless*". But God is not powerless. He loves us and wants to make reconciliation possible, so he took the initiative. He reached out to us. And he did that, not once we'd come to our senses and sorted ourselves out, once we'd cleaned

up our act and decided that we wanted to live lives of purity and holiness, once we'd started behaving properly – nor even once he'd beaten us into submission as the Allies did to Germany. He did that, Paul says, “*while we were still sinners*”. While we were still harbouring those attitudes and indulging in those behaviours that had caused all the trouble in the first place, God made the first move – with no guarantee that we'd accept it.

God loves this world and he did something about the brokenness that has characterised it since that first eruption of evil into it way back at the beginning of time. As Jesus himself said in the timeless words that John records in his gospel – chapter three, verse sixteen – “*God so loved the world that he sent his only Son*”. God's Son, Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, came into our world. He came to identify with us, to experience what life is like from our side of this divide – the pain, the anxiety, the vulnerability, the fragility – so that God could say, “Yes, I know what it's like and I want to change it for you”. He came to tell us about all the good things God wanted for us, to proclaim the good news about God's Kingdom. In fact, as he went about healing and helping and bringing transformation to the lives of the hopeless and helpless, he actually gave them glimpses of what that Kingdom might look like. He modelled in his own life what reconciliation with God would mean for us.

But what made the difference was not just his life, but his death. You see, as part of God's plan to bring about reconciliation with broken humanity, there had to be a sacrifice. Someone had to give something up, someone had to make that gesture. We were in no position to do anything about it, so Jesus did. He made the sacrifice – and a pretty spectacular one it was, too – so that God's plan could come into operation. Just as men and women were prepared to die in a limited war so that we could retain some freedoms, so Jesus – on a whole different cosmic level – went to the cross to show just how serious God was about offering this reconciliation to men and women. In dying on the cross, Jesus managed to break the power of evil to spoil our lives: he overcame the power and influence and consequences of sin: “*we were reconciled to God through the death of Jesus*”. And to show that this wasn't just some crackpot messianic pretender making tragic gestures in the hope of inspiring a few followers, a couple of days later, Jesus was brought back to life. He'd walked through death and out the other side, giving us the opportunity to follow him into the glorious eternal future that God had originally planned for us.

Now, once again, we need to stress that this is all God's doing. We can't work our way into his good books. It's not our religious observances or our efforts to be good that bring about reconciliation. It's God's love, pure and simple – God's love supremely demonstrated in that death on the cross – and all we have to do, all we can do, is accept it and believe. That's the invitation that is extended to every man and woman on this planet – you and me included. We come to God just as we are – powerless, sinful, hurting, bewildered, sorry, whatever – and God welcomes us. Then he assures us of his love, of his desire

for reconciliation and starts transforming us – restoring us to the people he originally intended us to be, giving us that inward peace which is the unmistakable sign of someone who knows they are safe in God’s hands. That means that we can be assured of life with him in his Kingdom when this life is over – the “*eternal life*” that the Bible speaks of so often.

And that eternal life starts now – as soon as you make that decision to accept God’s offer of reconciliation. It starts now with a renewed hope, a purpose in life, a satisfaction in being part of God’s family, a deep inward peace. The invitation is still there for you to trust God for the future, to reach out and grab his hand. As Paul says here, “*We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... Rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation*”. Are you up for that this morning?

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Why do you think our world is so divided? Is there one underlying reason? If so, what is it?
- 2) Do you feel that you have “inward peace”? If so, how would you explain it?
- 3) What is it that disturbs that peace? Do situations like the current crisis with Covid-19 affect it? How?
- 4) What does it mean to you to be reconciled to God? How does it affect your life day by day?
- 5) How can we help others to discover the peace that comes through reconciliation to God?