

## **Sermon: “A peacemaking church”**

**Gregor Henderson**

**Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra, Advent 4, 23 December 2007**

Bible readings: Micah 5:2-5a, Matthew 1:18-25

When Jesus was born, Bethlehem was under Roman occupation, with the vassal King Herod in charge. Two thousand years later it is occupied territory again, part of the West Bank of Palestine, with Israel in charge.

Ten days ago I was there. Nine Australian church leaders were concluding an official visit to Palestine and Israel. We joined in fellowship with the Christians of Palestine who are feeling the pressure of occupation and emigration, and we saw for ourselves the state of play between Palestine and Israel. We did the traditional Christian things - in Bethlehem the city mayor, Dr Victor Batarseh, showed us over the Church of the Nativity, built over the grotto which is the traditional site of Jesus' birth, and we visited the Shepherds Field and saw one of the several caves which are held, traditionally, to be the site of the angels' appearance to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. But we also met with several groups of people in Bethlehem, Christian and Muslim, and we heard story after story of the grimness of being occupied now for 40 years and we heard precious little hope for the future.

In the West Bank 50% of people live in poverty. In the refugee camps which have housed families for 60 years, those displaced by the 1948 takeover of their land and villages by the United Nations decision to establish Israel, emergency food parcels are still needed. At the Deheishah camp on the edge of Bethlehem we heard of unemployment rates of 80%, of the imprisonment of 15 year old boys for throwing stones at military watch towers, and we were thanked for the provision by Australian churches of food parcels just the previous day, supplied by the Christmas Bowl.

To travel to Bethlehem from Jerusalem is a short trip, just a few kilometres. But to enter Bethlehem requires going through a massive military checkpoint - 5 minutes for us, usually 2-3 hours for a Palestinian and then only if they have the correct permit, and Israelis are not permitted, by their own government, to go at all. And then you go through one of only three gates for Bethlehem in the huge Barrier Wall erected by Israel. The Wall surrounds Bethlehem on three sides, it's up to 8 metres high, it's ugly physically and it's ugly spiritually and morally in terms of what it says about human relationships, about human dignity and human rights. Mind you, the occupied still have some hopefulness and some humour - on the Palestinian side of the wall there's lots of graffiti, one a huge beribboned red and white rosette with the words "with love and kisses" and underneath "nothing lasts forever". And another one, half way up the wall which says "please mister, I want my ball back".

Bethlehem feels like a town under siege. Of course let me acknowledge that the Israelis have good reason to emphasise their need for security. Although it's been 12 months or more since a suicide bombing, they live under constant fear of a Palestinian terrorist attack.

Two thousand years ago it was much the same, although Bethlehem was a much smaller town then. Its ruler was a friend of Rome who didn't hesitate to kill young children in Bethlehem when he thought there was a threat to his power. Poverty was

still the lot of most Bethlehem people then, with heavy Roman taxation and quick and cruel punishment for any infractions.

This was the world Jesus was born into. And amazingly, what was the chief message attached to his birth? Peace! Not conflict, but peace. Not vindictiveness, but peace. Not polarisation, but peace.

The prophet Micah prophesied it 750 years earlier, speaking of one to be born in Bethlehem who "shall be the one of peace". The angels announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds sing "Glory to God in the highest heav'n, and on earth peace, goodwill among people". John the Baptist's father meets Mary during her pregnancy and declares that her child will "guide our feet into the way of peace". And as I stood a fortnight ago on the Mount of Olives looking across at the marvellous expanse of Jerusalem, we couldn't help but think of Jesus stopping there on Palm Sunday, weeping over Jerusalem, an occupied city full of conflict even then, and saying "If only, if only you had recognised the things that make for peace".

This peace that Jesus brings is not just an inner peace, a personal peace for each one of us with God, although thankfully it is that. But it's also God's gift of peace between neighbours and between peoples. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul writes "Christ is our peace - he has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us". When we know God's love is for every human being, then relating to them in peace is the only way to go.

Friends, we are a peace-loving and a peace-making church. In our pastoral care for each other, in our vast community services work throughout Australia, in our international partnerships and in our overseas aid projects, we are seeking always to be peacemakers.

Let me close with a story from last Tuesday, from the Uniting Church's Young Ambassadors for Peace project. For four years Joy Balazo, one of our staff members from Sydney, has been working on and off with warring groups of people in the southern highlands of Papua New Guinea. Last Monday in the town of Tari, 96 people from 17 warring tribes gathered for a workshop to be led by Joy and by the Highlands bishop of the United Church in PNG. These tribes have been fighting for the past 20 years. Among the 96 were close relatives of people who've been killed and some of the killers themselves. It was tense, risky, dangerous. Enemies met each other in person for the first time. After the first day and a half of the workshop they began shaking hands, they wept with each other, and embraced. Then they ceremonially placed their hatreds and prejudices at the foot of a stone cross, and burnt them. Ceremonially they washed themselves in purification. Ceremonially they put on white Young Ambassadors for Peace T-shirts, to symbolise their new life. They are calling it a miracle up there in Tari, a Christmas miracle of peace.

The world suffers horribly from conflicts and wars. It always has. But Jesus comes "to guide our feet into the way of peace". Receive his gift of peace afresh this Christmas.

Amen.