

# Peace on Earth

*A sermon on Luke 2: 1-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 December 2023*

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## Message

The birth of Jesus we see the beginning of a peace mission that is not based on force but on patience, forgiveness and presence.

## Sermon

If you sort out your Christmas cards, there are probably quite a few of them that mention “peace on earth”, but why? What does it mean to gather and sing of peace on earth while horrific wars rage around the world? Ukraine. Gaza. They’re just the ones that make it to our news cycles. Unfortunately there are plenty more. So what does Christmas have to do with “peace on earth”?

Well the short answer is because when the angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus, they sang “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.” But if you don’t settle for the short answer and keep asking “why?”, it is not so obvious where to go from there, is it?

For many of us, the only thing that peace and Christmas have to do with each other is that for a few hours tomorrow we will put aside hostilities and pretend that everything is fine between us and our relatives.

You’ve probably heard that famous story from World War I of the British and German soldiers hearing one another singing Silent Night from their trenches, and coming out and celebrating Christmas day together. It is often told as an illustration of how Christmas brings peace, but the trouble is that even in that story, all it brought was a few hours pause in hostilities. The next day those soldiers obeyed the orders to return to their trenches and resume killing each other. So much for peace on earth.

The Christmas cards provide no hint of the real reason the gospel writer includes this promise of peace on earth in his account of the birth of Jesus. Luke is opening his account of the story of Jesus by introducing some of the major themes, and one of those major themes is a contrast between two different models of peace. The peace that Jesus came to bring about on earth is set in stark contrast to the “Peace of Rome”.

“Pax Romana” or the “Peace of Rome” was like a major slogan of the Roman Empire. The nearest equivalent today would be the term “national security”, or perhaps “global security”. The Romans trumpeted their claim of having established peace everywhere, but it was a peace that was all about securing the interests of the empire around the world. It was a peace secured by the presence of a ruthless army who stood ready to deal quickly with any threat to “the peace”, and there was certainly nothing peaceful about the way they dealt with those threats.

And so Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus is chock full of images of the costs borne by the many for the peace of Rome. He starts with the naming of the Emperor Augustus and of the local Governor Quirinius. So what? Well try a more recent equivalent and see what it does. If I were to say, “The hero of our story emerged in the late 1990’s,” you’d be none the wiser

about what points my story might be going to make. But if I said, “The hero of our story emerged in the John Howard and Jeff Kennett era,” you’d already be alert to the likelihood that certain contrasts were about to be drawn.

You would immediately be all ears, ready to see what sort of images I wanted to focus on from the Howard/Kennett era. Would I talk of an economic boom, a new wave of infrastructure development, and the freeing up of labour laws, or of outback detention centres, the closure of mental health services, and getting sucked into the Iraq & Afghanistan wars.

Luke is setting up his story in just that way. What sort of picture does he paint of the much-vaunted “peace of Rome”? A government imposed census designed to calculate likely tax income for the empire and which pushes the population around mercilessly with no regard for their capacity to travel or their needs to maintain their livelihoods. The fear of the soldiers if one failed to comply. Alienated people forced on to the road with nowhere to shelter, even for a woman in labour. A woman giving birth in a cow shed because there are no services, no accommodation, no help.

What Luke is doing here is painting a picture of what we heard Isaiah describe in one of our earlier readings as the “yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.”

This, Luke is saying, is the peace of Rome. This is the kind of peace that comes to the city streets after the Extinction Rebellion protesters are forcibly removed by riot police. The kind of peace maintained by prohibiting cricket players from writing anti-war slogans on their shoes. This is a peace protected by force, by fear, by the imposition of conformity with the national interests. And so it is in the midst of these images that Luke tell us of angels promising that the birth of this child is all bound up with an alternative view of peace on earth – with God’s plan for God’s kind of peace on earth.

The contrasting nature of God’s vision of peace is worked out in detail across the whole rest of the gospel story, but it begins here. This account of the birth is being told in light of the rest of the story by people who already knew the crucified and risen Christ, so they are telling this story of his origins to help make sense of what comes later.

One of the most important things we can already see here about the peace of God, in contrast to the peace of Rome, is the way it arrives. Jesus makes it clear later on that he could call down the armies of heaven if that’s what he wished to do, so the fact that he doesn’t is enormously important. God does not go about bringing peace by marching in in power with trumpets blaring and weapons displayed to enforce conformity with some divine edict. Nor does God sponsor an uprising of the poor and oppressed to violently overthrow their oppressors and create a utopia for the poor built on the spilt blood of the rich.

Instead, the Word becomes flesh. God is born among us, as a fragile baby, born under the rod of oppression. God is born among us like one of those Palestinian babies being born to a terrified mother, sheltering in the rubble of a bombed out apartment block because there is no place in the inn or the hospital. Born in fear of both the murderous terrorists of Hamas and of the all-powerful Israeli Defence Force whose power cannot calm the minds of its own

soldiers who are so on edge that they can't even be trusted not to shoot the white flag waving hostages they were sent to save.

When murderous force is deployed to destroy murderous force, everybody suffers and any sort of peace that results is not worth the name.

God's kind of peace does not come with unstoppable force, but by embracing the way of vulnerability, by being present among us living out the way of peace in concrete acts of forgiveness and mercy and reconciliation. It is a peace that will turn the other cheek rather than going on feeding the violent cycle of bitterness and hatred. It is a peace that will go to the cross still speaking words of forgiveness rather than call down the hosts of heaven to safeguard the hero and enforce compliance with his agenda. It is a peace that begins with placing himself at our mercy, as a baby placed into our hands while edgy soldiers stalk the streets.

This alternative and radically contrasting vision of peace begins here with the birth stories and runs all the way through the story. And when the local power brokers decide that the interests of their kind of peace are best served by sacrificing this one man rather than risking the wrath of Rome, the story leads inevitably to the cross, whereupon the message of peace is writ larger than life when the sacrificed victim emerges from the tomb, still with no more vengefulness than when he emerged from the womb.

The implications of this are not confined to national politics and international relations. They play themselves out right here among us in the fabric of our relationships with one another in this congregation and in the other circles within which we move.

Look around the congregation. There are people here who have upset you in the last year. There are awkward and difficult people who repeatedly frustrate you and seem to be obstacles to the way you know things should be. Pretty much everyone of us is someone who someone else thinks needs to change and soon if we are to be able to be tolerated and lived with peaceably. I want to see change and you want to see change and we all want to see it now, if not before.

And as one who is a designated leader here, I know as well as any of you and better than most how tempting it is to wield power to set things right, to enforce compliance with the way things should be, as determined by me. I know the temptation to resort to the Roman way, to the way of the world around us, to the way society has always operated. Sacrifice someone else's interests to hasten the realisation of mine.

Well, sometimes our perceptions of who needs to change and how might be absolutely justified and absolutely right, but into the midst of our righteous zealotry comes the message of Christmas. God is not in a hurry. God is not sending in the troops to enforce the new order of things. God is willing to start right at the bottom, and to live among us, fermenting the new culture through specific acts of vulnerable presence, gracious forgiveness, and resilient mercy.

And if we would be followers of the one whose birth we celebrate tonight, then we are called to follow in his footsteps and treat one another likewise. Jesus has unmasked the lie of the peace of Rome, the lie of modern international stability, but so far most of the world has responded to it by simply ratcheting up the violence with which they seek to make it work.

Tonight we celebrate the birth of the alternative, the birth of a new chance to be the people we were created to be, set free from the cycles of hostility and violence and set free to grow in grace. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace. Real peace. Amen.