

## Homily for Second Sunday of Advent “The Peaceable Kingdom”

In looking at the readings for today I was immediately drawn to Isaiah and how the prophet paints his vision for the future, a compelling vision that has often been named “the peaceable kingdom.”

Isaiah speaks of a vision of a new heaven and new earth; of life coming out of destruction; a shoot sprouts from the seemingly dead stump of the tree; the wolf and the lamb will lie down together, no one shall hurt or destroy on God’s holy mountain. Paradise will be restored, all nature will sing in harmony. He is painting a picture of what peace looks like.

That vision was inspirational to a fellow named Edward Hicks from Bucks County, Pennsylvania. He was a Quaker minister and to make a little extra income, he painted, mostly tavern signs, farm equipment, whatever was most needed and he was good at it. He began to make a fair amount of money doing it, and this upset his Quaker congregation, who felt he was violating their customs of simple living. It caused quite a split in the members of his congregation, so he gave it up and became a farmer. Trouble was, he was a terrible farmer. He gave that up and the preaching ministry too. However, he discovered he could use his painting to express his faith and he began to draw oil paintings based on this reading from Isaiah, Chapter 11. He created over 100 versions of it and today we know it as his best known work titled: “The Peaceable Kingdom.”

In most of the paintings the predator and the prey are together. There is a bull, a lion, a lamb, a bear, a child. For Hicks the animals reflected something of our temperaments—the lion was anger, the bear was calmness. Maybe it calls us to ask ourselves, “What is the lion in me and what is the lamb?” “How do I reconcile both within me?” In another part of the painting he had William Penn conducting a treaty with the Indians. A river flows toward them, and light shines upon them. Perhaps this was to show us that the Spirit, the light placed within us by God, helps us to dwell together in peace, despite our animosities and our differences. It could be that Edward Hicks was inspired to paint this picture over and over because he was obsessed with a vision of peace. You might be thinking, “Well, how is a 200 year old painting relevant for me?”

I think it’s relevant because you and I struggle with the very same questions? What is our vision of peace? Is it a restored relationship? Is it a decision to help those who have been treated unjustly? Is it our acceptance of being co-creators of a peaceable kingdom for the future? Is it a world free of war?

Unfortunately, it’s easy to visualize war and violence, we only need think of the war in Afghanistan, the civil war in Syria, or the fighting between ethnic groups in Iraq, or the drug wars in Mexico, or the tension between North and South Korea—just as in Isaiah’s time as well as in our own, devastation is present. But what does Isaiah do? He portrays to the people of Israel a message of hope. That what God has cut off is also that which God restores. That the One who judges His people for their sins, is also the One who forgives them and restores Peace.

Isaiah's message to Israel and to us is the need to know this coming Prince of Peace. Isaiah holds out hope to us that we can change, that we can be transformed, that grace working in human nature accomplishes so much more than we could ever imagine. The prophet grew old and yet he continued to watch and wait, all the time proclaiming the Messianic hope. He does what God's people have always done: he sits still long enough, listens closely enough, discerns carefully enough, and it becomes clear. We step back, take the long view, and ask "What does God want us to see?" It is a moment when the message and meaning of Advent emerges.

We know that Advent is the time set aside for us to remember that God is indeed "God-with-us." This conviction is the grounding for the peace of which we speak at Christmas, the peace for which we all so earnestly yearn.

Paul tells us the peace for which we yearn is to be found in openness to others, the kind of openness we saw in Christ. He was open to both the Jews and the Gentiles. This openness, this hospitality will result in a peace that is perceptible.

John tells us the peace we seek has to be found in repentance, in a return to righteousness, to lives of integrity, to relationships rooted in honesty and respect. John calls for a change of mind and heart, one that might be more easily described than accomplished.

And yet....The peaceable kingdom of God for which we long is possible. It may require that we put an ax to resentments and biases rooted in our hearts. We might have to refrain from demanding our way and relinquish some of our importance. We might have to swallow our pride and be converted from selfishness to genuine concern for others.

The Scriptures are clear: Isaiah calls for a peaceable kingdom, Paul says the path to that peaceable kingdom is openness and hospitality, and John calls for lives of repentance, righteousness and integrity.

All three readings for this Advent morning give us the vision of the prophet, the artistry of the painter and the provision of daily bread in the Eucharist, soon to be received, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. If we sit still long enough, if we listen closely enough, if we discern carefully enough, the vision will become clear. In this Advent season of preparation and in the days beyond, we can graft our lives to the shoot that has emerged from the stump of Jesse, and pray for his peace to fill us and transform us. I pray we can open our eyes, ears, hearts and hands to be promoters of the peaceable kingdom here, now, and in times to come. So I ask: Are we ready?

Barbara McMullen, CDP

Sources used:

The Word for Every Season—Diane Bergant, CSA

Homily thoughts by Dr. Ken Carter—2010