

**Kawtholei Karen Bible College
Mae La Refugee Camp , Thailand July 2006**

The Dream of Peace

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

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 had a dream the other night – while I was asleep in my bed..

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

The year was some time in the not too distant future....

This year the Baptist World Alliance world Congress will be held in Karen State in the new Democratic Republic of Burma. President Aung Sang Su Kyi and the new alliance of state leaders comprised of elected representatives of all ethnic minorities in Burma were unanimous in endorsing the Congress to be held in Burma which now has a policy of religious tolerance and allows complete freedom for the Christian minority to practice their faith and continue dialogue with other religious groups.

Rev Dr. Simon, the principal of the now internationally recognized Christian University of Karen State welcomed the announcement and encouragement from the representatives of the Government. He also acknowledged the generous support of the national re-building program aimed at re-establishing Karen villages destroyed by the Military regime in decades gone by. The establishment of hospitals and schools to enable access to education and health care for all Karens was also very welcome.

Baptist leaders and delegates from nearly every nation on earth will gather at the Christian University of Karen State to celebrate what God is doing around the world and especially in Burma where the church continues to grow and demonstrate new ways of working for peace and justice for all people in the wonderfully diverse republic of Burma.

Since the diaspora of Karen people during the years of hardship, there are many thousands of Karen people in every Western Nation and Baptists from around the globe are familiar with the faith and courage of Karen and other Burmese minority groups whose story now stands in equal status and importance to that of South Africa and the liberation of East Timor.

This is just a dream! It hasn't happened of course. But can visions and dreams of peace – be more than just wishful thinking? Can a dream like this be based on something real that actually gives hope and inspires us to action...

The word translated peace in the bible has a much greater meaning than simply the absence of war. As you may know, the OT idea of "Shalom" is about peacefulness, completeness, tranquility, safety, well-being, wholeness in body and mind, and about 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 – In other words, **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. Jesus says,

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 terrible – 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 promising nothing less than the hopes and dreams of Israel as they would have understood these 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 Australia at the moment and many of the current government policies in relation to Iraq, terrorism, and refugees are based on irrational fears. We operate with a mindset of what could happen if were to let boat people take over our country or let terrorists hide a bomb under every rock and bridge.

I cannot even begin to pretend that I know what it is like for many of you to live in fear. But even in Australia people live in fear too and they want to try to make sure that nothing bad ever happens to them by taking away all risks, all pain, all possibilities of something going wrong...

But this is a false peace.

The peace of Jesus' vision is that which embraces hope in the midst of conflict. That acknowledges pain yet sees hope and still 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 anger and pain 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... As this wonderful affirmation of faith from the Canadian Baptist Churches shows..

*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.*

Notice that this affirmation of faith doesn't start with the words "We Believe.." because Christian hope is about much more than just believing in your head. In this affirmation of faith it was a shared message of hope that begins and ends with the truth that we are not alone in our struggle, our pain, our longing for freedom. 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 is around a shared meal) 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...

When we gather to worship God together we don’t just come to sing praises, or out of duty because we think it is what we must do to please God. When we worship together we open ourselves to be caught up in God’s dream of peace.

*Sabbath keeping is not about taking a day off but about
being recalled to our knowledge of and gratitude for God's activity in creating
the world, giving liberty to captives, and overcoming the powers of death.*

It is about taking part in the activity by which God is shaping a new creation, by which God is working through and in us for hope and peace.

So we are caught up in God’s heart, in God’s dream of Shalom as we open ourselves in worship together as we gather around the table in the name of Jesus, the prince of Peace...

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.

When we read this part of John’s Gospel at Westgate Baptist Community we also read a passage out of Acts 16...

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 baptized. 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, practical and practicality ordinary way they went about their work of spreading the Gospel. 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 important 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 others. We must trust that God is working in the hearts of other people and look for the signs of the Spirit's activity.

How is the mission of the local church worked out in our lives? It is worked out in 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 building of our faith does not just happen in church or in some activity of the church. It happens as we are going out and coming in each 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.

The hope and faith of the Karen people is indeed spreading throughout all the world and as you connect with the people of Westgate Baptist Church in Australia or in other Churches in America, in Europe or in New Zealand or in Malaysia etc.. we will find that the vision of peace gathers strength and momentum and hope and we can live and work knowing that God's dream of Shalom will come to be..

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.

AMEN