

**BIBLE:** Luke 2:1-20

<sup>2</sup> In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to their own town to register.

<sup>4</sup> So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,  
<sup>14</sup> 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

**SERMON:** Peace

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.*

Earlier we heard that the second advent candle is often called the candle of Peace, and the All-Age talk was on the Prince of Peace, but I wonder what 'peace' means to you, especially at this time of year? Maybe it's something as humble as a quiet moment over a hot cup at the start or end of your day? Or, perhaps, if you're an organised person, feeling relaxed on going to bed at night knowing you've prepared everything needed for the next day?

On thinking about this question, lots of ideas came into my mind. Everything from my dad's packed lunch, or his piece, that he used to take to work; through to bits and pieces – all sorts of

things, which my cluttered flat is full of. Now, you may well dismiss these as not the right sorts of peace to be thinking about in relation to the passage from Luke that we've just heard. But bear with me, as there's a lot of nuance to Luke's meaning of peace, as I hope we'll explore together.

In just these few everyday or commonplace examples of peace we've identified that peace has a potential sound, quiet; that peace engenders emotional responses, including relaxation; and that peace is often a temporal thing, it can be fleeting, or require time set aside to be experienced. And further consideration revealed that peace, or 'a piece', can provide nourishment; and that bits and pieces can be all sorts of things, of all shapes, and sizes. And this is good as far as it goes, and sounds very egalitarian, but this is also quite small-scale thinking.

Up to this point we've been reflecting on peace at the level of things that we can manipulate and control. If we broaden out our thoughts, to the meaning of peace in the world as a whole, our understanding of peace needs to equivalently expand. So, what do you think peace means today for the wider world? I'm genuinely looking for an answer! It might be easier to ask if there is peace in the world today, and if so, what does it look like – and what is it not?

We likely agree that there are many areas of the world today in desperate need of peace. And we pray in hope for an end to the conflict in Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Myanmar. However, particularly here in the UK, we do live in relatively peaceful times. To affirm this, let us try to imagine living under foreign rule, not as part of a united kingdom but within an empire, governed by the imposed delegate of an emperor issuing unfamiliar rules and decrees from afar. And while that may indeed be conceivable to many of us, imagine if that foreign ruler was, within living memory, honoured as divine? And, not only divine, but someone lauded as the 'benefactor and saviour of the whole world' as indeed the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar was, in 27 BC, in an ancient Myrian inscription. However, now imagine that you're Judean, with a very different, long-established understanding of divinity, that's monotheistic, and certainly doesn't reside within a powerful and wealthy human being living in Rome. And yet, at the time of Jesus' birth, Judeans were primed and awaiting the arrival of a Saviour, a conquering Kingly Messiah, prophesied about in the Old Testament. Therefore, although while we may read about Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, as being a roughly 200 year-long golden age of Roman imperialism, we need to remember that this was achieved through military conquest.

It's hard for us to understand the tyrannical and troubled times Mary and Joseph lived in, as outlined at the start of chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel. And how do we comprehend ongoing debates about the historical accuracy of the census dates described by the author of Luke's Gospel? What we do know is that, in these verses, Jesus' birth narrative in Bethlehem is described in a way that

clearly and deliberately contrasts sources of earthly power and peace, with God's celestial power, outworking, purpose, and peace. Therefore, although it is an earthly ruler's decree, and a census, which prompts Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, Luke's Gospel emphasises this narrative to illustrate the temporal and subservient nature of Roman rule to God's greater Sovereign power. Bethlehem is highlighted as the location of Jesus' birth, as being **the town of David**, and because Joseph **belonged to the house and line of David**, thereby fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy which Nathan reported David in 2 Samuel chapter 7 verses 12-16:

*<sup>12</sup> when your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. <sup>14</sup> I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. <sup>15</sup> But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. <sup>16</sup> Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me<sup>[b]</sup>; your throne shall be established for ever.” <sup>17</sup>*

Additionally, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem fulfils the prophecy in Micah chapter 5 verse 2:

*<sup>[c]</sup>But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”*

And in Bethlehem Mary **gave birth to her firstborn, a son** supporting the fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14 which prophesied:

*<sup>[14]</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you<sup>[c]</sup> a sign: the virgin<sup>[d]</sup> will conceive and give birth to a son, and<sup>[e]</sup> will call him Immanuel.<sup>[f]</sup>*

Already in just these few verses, worldly rule is shown to ultimately serve God's greater purpose. Furthermore, notions or expectations of a military conquering elite are also subverted by Luke describing the birth of our Messiah, as taking place within **a manger, because there was no guest room available for them**. Jesus' birth was humble, lowly, and unrecognised by the townsfolk around him.

Indeed, in Luke's Gospel, it is to a group of very humble individuals, **living out in the fields**, that the Good News of Jesus' birth is first proclaimed. While rulers remain uninformed it is to a marginalised group, living on the outskirts of contemporary society, that **an angel of the Lord appeared**. Terrified shepherds were illuminated by **the glory of the Lord**. Again, here Luke is emphasising that earthly power, wealth, and social status are not what's important to God. And, with the subsequent appearance of **a great company of the heavenly host [...] praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on**

**whom his favour rests”** we learn that God’s message is not just about the birth of a special baby. It is about the coming of **the Messiah, the Lord**. This amazing news is that **a Saviour** has been born, that will bring **on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests**.

And this heavenly glory and peace on earth that the angels proclaim is far greater than meagre worldly peace. This is not simply the absence of war; a quiet moment; or the satisfaction of a completed to-do list. God’s peace draws upon the scriptural ideas of the Hebrew *shalom* and Greek *eirēnē*, meaning wholeness, well-being, and harmony. This understanding of peace involves justice, restoration, healing, and the flourishing of all creation under the gracious reign of God. The sort of peace heralded by angels is that which Isaiah foresaw, when he cried out in chapter 52 verse 7:

*How beautiful on the mountains, are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”*

The use of **favour**, in verse 14 of Luke chapter 2, is here synonymous with God’s grace – a gift that is freely given and not earned by human effort or social status. This too is entirely consistent with the pattern of God’s mercy emphasised throughout Luke’s Gospel that we’ve already identified. Luke celebrates God’s merciful subversion of what is considered important and valuable: not a ruler of an earthly empire but a newborn baby being the saviour of the world, humbly born in a manger; to whom outsiders and marginalised folk are invited to draw near. God’s peace is extended by grace to restore the relationship between God and humanity as written in Romans chapter 5 verse 1:

*“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

In our verses from Luke the coming of the one who brings peace is declared, however the cross is where that peace is secured. Angels announce Jesus’ birth and mission, while his death on the cross accomplishes it. As Colossians chapter 1, verse 20 notes:

*“and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”*

Caesar Augustus may have issued a decree directing **the entire Roman world** at that time, but God sent his Good News for eternity, and **for all the people**. And while Pax Romana was enforced by the edge of a sword, God’s peace was announced above a field at the edge of Bethlehem, to frightened shepherds, armed only with astonishment and excitement to share the news as promised in Isaiah chapter 9, especially verses 6 and 7:

*“<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”*

And this Good News is still astonishing and exciting people today. It’s amazing that Almighty God chose to come to earth and be born in a manger. And that this was witnessed by ordinary people like us whose testimony was so great we’re still talking about it and the incredible gift of God’s redeeming grace and favour. This truly is the reconciling power of God’s peace. Peace that, although heralded by heavenly angels, began in a lowly manger, because there was no other room available. Peace that was proclaimed to the poor, who had every reason to be afraid, yet were told to fear not. And this is God’s peace which is still entrusted to us now, to demonstrate, participate in, and embody, as Christ’s Church and God’s Kingdom on earth.

Just like the shepherds who returned to their flocks glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, this is our calling. In our humble and ordinary lives to carry and share this extraordinary announcement, the Good News for all: that in Jesus Christ, God draws us near, keeps his promises, and offers us the opportunity for peace.

So let us pray: *Gracious God, You are the source of all true peace, which surpasses all worldly understanding. Thank You for Your precious gift of peace, for Jesus Christ, born in a manger and who died on a cross for all our sins. By Your Holy Spirit and our love for You make us instruments of Your peace in the world today. And may Your peace guard our hearts, guide our steps, and shape our witness to Your glory, this advent season and always. Amen.*