

## **Colossians 3:12-17**

### **People of peace**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the big themes through the Christmas season is that of peace. Probably the biggest proclamation of peace is when the angels appear to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests" (Luke 2:14 NIV). This is what the birth of Jesus means. Glory to God in heaven and peace to us on earth.

So today I thought it would be good to look through what scripture actually says about peace. Peace can mean many things to different people. To those in war, peace means the end of fighting. To those living hectic and chaotic lives, peace means calm and stillness. To those with troubled minds, peace means an inner tranquillity.

The Greek word for peace used in the New Testament can mean any of those things, but it was also a common greeting or farewell, as in "peace be with you". In the Old Testament, peace is often linked together with something else. So there are passages that speak of 'peace and security', usually in reference to the threat of invasion. There are passages that speak of 'peace and prosperity', in reference to good harvests and safety from wild beasts. We also have peace associated with moral concepts like truth and faithfulness and even righteousness. Righteousness will bring peace, but there is no peace for the wicked.

Back at the start of the Old Testament, in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, also called the books of Moses, peace is linked to sacrifice and being reconciled to God. It was all about being at peace with God. Peaceful relations between humans, important as they might be, are not nearly so important as peace with God. The essential element of this was animal sacrifice, the shedding of blood. And this draws attention to the costliness of peace. Peace is not simply an empty wish. It's the result of a process that, in this instance, requires taking a life.

The other main emphasis of peace in the Old Testament comes through the prophet Isaiah. At the time, despite God's provision of sacrifice as a means of making peace, the people had no peace, either in the land or with God. And Isaiah predicts the coming of a redeemer who will embody peace and bring it to the people

This is where we get to a very well-known verse:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This is part of God's promise that peace is coming, and it's coming in the form of a newborn baby, a son who has great authority. This means that Jesus as the Messiah would usher in God's reign of peace.

The greatest 'peace' Jesus achieved for us is that he became the once-for-all sacrifice to take away our sin and reconcile us to God. We also see Jesus giving this peace to those who are troubled with afflictions, healing them and telling them to go their way in peace. And he even commands peace upon the physical elements, like when he calmed the storm.

This peace was also Jesus' farewell gift to the disciples. Before his ascension, he gave them when he breathed his Spirit into them. This gift of peace with God, made available through Christ, means that Christians in the community of faith should be able to live in peace with each other.

So, when we use the greeting of 'peace be with you', it's not a mere wish for peace, but a reminder of the peace given through Christ. This is what St Paul is reminding the Colossian church in our Epistle reading today. He admonishes them to let the peace of Christ reign. This carries the sense of peace being in charge of their hearts as a judge. Whenever we must make those hard decisions, it's Christ's peace that does the judging.

It's worth noting that the 'you' in this text is plural. St Paul is talking to the congregation as a community. This is not so much about individual and internal peace, but the people of God who gather together under the reign of Christ's peace. Everything they do together, all the relationships, decisions, and plans, are to be considered in view of honouring the peace of Christ.

One part of what this looks like is through living out the other virtues mentioned in this text. All five of them, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, are found elsewhere in the epistles describing the actions and character of God. And as God's people who are called out of darkness into his glorious light, we should strive to live out these same things. Peace has come into the world and into our hearts. A life full of peace is a life full of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. This is the life we are now called to live. This is the life the Holy Spirit empowers us to live; notice the similarities here with the fruit of the Spirit.

All this is what the angels were rejoicing about on that first Christmas night when they proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." God is glorified through the birth of Jesus, the prince of peace. And God is glorified through God's people letting the peace of Christ rule in their lives. And God is glorified whenever people of peace bring his peace into a world that is so desperately looking for it. So, in preparation for going out in peace, I will leave you now with God's peace, as I do at the end of practically every sermon.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour. Amen.