

Sermon on Luke 15: 1-10
Walking in the Way of Peace

So today marks the 15th anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and other US targets.

The definitive 'where was I when...' moment of recent memory.

As we're all aware, although there had been terrorist attacks before, this was different.

It was on a scale and with an audacity we could barely believe.

It shocked our senses in a way unlike most things before and the mere mention of the numbers, 9/11, is enough to bring to mind the tragedy.

Today, sadly, as we sit here 15 years on, it's hard to see that much progress has been made.

We don't need to rehearse the terrible things that are still happening in the world, we're all reminded each night on our television screens.

But suffice to say, the situation has not improved.

The peoples of the world, so it seems, are no closer to learning to live in peace with one another: to respect one another across cultures and races, and to act in ways that will see human society flourish rather than founder.

Things remain difficult.

Reflecting on our lives and that of the world today opens up any number of questions for a people of faith like us, especially when we consider we follow in the way of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Who are we called to be in the face of evil and murder on such scale?

How do we look through the lens of Jesus and locate compassion in this context?

What is our responsibility as Christians within societies and nations as time moves on?

These are incredibly hard questions to answer and perhaps even more difficult to respond to with actions.

We feel a deep anger at such wanton atrocities as the terrorist attacks and this is just as it should be.

The complete lack of respect for innocent human life is condemned at every point by the Christian tradition.

It was the belief in the inherent dignity and worth of all human life that marked out the Christian faith from early on.

It was a sharp distinction from the way the rest of the world saw things.

If God created everything, and human life was particularly God breathed, it demanded a respect for all human life.

No exceptions.

The ultimate test of this is of course Jesus' command to love one's enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Christopher Hitchens famously called this the most immoral idea of all.

He thought we should hate our enemies and do everything we could to destroy them.

He felt the idea of loving our enemies was a sure path to the destruction of all that was good.

But the Christian tradition has always seen it differently.

We are called to love our enemies however hard a task that might be.

This has nothing to do with condoning evil that is perpetrated (people often conflate those two ideas).

It's quite the opposite in fact.

In extending love to those who hate we refuse to perpetuate hate.

It stops with us.

We defeat hate by refusing to acquiesce to it, even when it comes against us.

We absorb it and it fizzles away with nowhere left to go.

This takes great faith though, and can only be achieved through the work of the Spirit.

It is a position of strength not weakness.

But it may not engender change.

This is the hardest thing; continuing to love however others might respond.

It's easy to maintain bitterness. It's natural.

It's far harder to love without exception even when it is not reciprocated or even accepted.

But it's complex.

The insidious nature of evil is that it seeps into systems and politics and broader decision making.

It ripples outwards.

The world trade centre is destroyed with the cost of 1000s of lives, itself dreadful enough.

But then economies are thrown into turmoil, fear is instilled in populations making them suspicious of their neighbours and friends, and as we all know it led to a war we are still fighting, costing many 1000s more innocent lives.

I don't envy governments and politicians having to make these terribly difficult decisions and I'm sure we all scratch our heads sometimes at the decisions they do make.

But just as Jesus makes the difficult decision to seek the lost sheep and leave the 99, so we must ask ourselves how we face the difficult and costly call of walking the way of peace in a time of turmoil.

The world is not really that different from Jesus' day, there's the same politics, the same greed, the same mix of good and evil.

We just have bigger and better means of killing each other these days.

Whatever your politics, and whatever you think about decisions that have been made, all of us are charged with being peacemakers, of finding ways to be instruments of God's peace in the world.

And we do well not to forget that Jesus called the peacemakers blessed.

I was reading a biography of Pope Francis not that long ago.

It's an amazing tale.

The decisions he had to make to walk the way of peace in the Argentina of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, make many of the challenges we face as a church here in Australia pale into insignificance.

What does the church do when the military government and the Marxist rebels are two equally bad choices for the welfare of the people?

Where priests are regularly 'disappeared' for simply proclaiming the cause of love and seeking a better lot for the poorest of the poor?

Where almost every day the politics could change and the agreements you thought you had become worthless overnight, requiring a whole new approach the following day?

Peacemaking in Jesus' name is never easy.

Some of you may know the work of Joy Balazo and the young ambassadors for peace.

Joy has worked through UnitingWorld throughout the south-east Asia region for over 20 years helping tribal and other groups engaged in conflict to find a way to peace;

and training especially young people in the strategies of mediation and peacemaking.

It would be impossible to judge how many lives she has saved in the process, but the number would be significant.

A former worker in UnitingWorld who was travelling in PNG with Joy once told the story of being suddenly accosted on a remote road by a number of men with machetes.

Obviously a startling and frightening moment.

Far from being afraid, Joy, at the diminutive height of 5 foot and not much, simply got out of the car and started speaking with the group.

She was calm and direct and eventually the men left them alone and they carried on their trip.

In 2012 she was awarded the World Methodist Peace Prize for her work.

None of us know what lies around the next bend, but the difficult way of peacemaking in Jesus' name remains a lifelong calling.

Peacemaking actually begins in our own context and with our own response to things.

Most weeks at some point we will face some decision, large or small, which will confront us with deciding who we will be.

The collective witness of the church in this regard is only as powerful as the commitment of each Christian to walk in this way.

The events of September 11, 2001 may have happened over the other side of the world, but in our own context there are multiple challenges we face as a society.

Human flourishing doesn't happen by chance as history shows us over and over again.

Domestic violence, racial intolerance, homelessness, abuse.

Such things, sadly, remain with us and are probably much closer than we mostly think.

There's no shortage of the need for peace, the deep peace of God which is more than the absence of conflict but rather a world where everyone is cared for, fed, loved, free.

Sometimes peacemaking will be as simple as being a friend, being willing to be on call.

Sometimes it might require standing with someone through difficult times.

Sometimes being willing to endure the scorn of others who judge you.

Sometimes even being hurt in the process.

This is the way of the cross and God's eternal peace forged in Jesus, the prince of peace.

There is a call also, of course, for us to find inner peace with God.

It will be hard to be peacemakers if conflict rages within us.

I don't think this means having everything settled or not having questions or doubts, even struggles that will remain with us.

Mother Theresa fought for most of her adult life with questions around the presence and absence of God and yet she has just formally been made a saint in the Catholic church as we're all aware.

But I think it does mean holding onto the inkling that there is a God of love who was made known in human flesh, who calls us to love one another.

Of being willing to say every day, O Lord I believe, help my unbelief.

And in clinging to the God of love, even by our fingernails, being willing to find ways to share his peace, large or small.

Because my hunch is that every act of peacemaking is large in God's eyes.

If God's mission was to reconcile the world to himself in Christ, I'm sure there is rejoicing in heaven every time peace is reconciled into conflicts to bring about a new time.

Today on this 15th anniversary of Sept 11, 2001, we mourn for the lost and their families, for those who have been affected since in any number of places and ways.

We pray for them all and for those who would perpetrate such terror, that they may find a better way.

But we also thank God for all who have and are seeking a more peaceful world.

And we hear God's call in Jesus, the one who sought the lost, also to seek the way of his deep and everlasting peace.

In Jesus' name. Amen.