

The Peaceable Kingdom

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron

at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on the Second Sunday in Advent, 4 December 2022

The readings were: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 7:1-7, 18-19; Matthew 3:1-12



“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6).

So reads one of the best loved verses in the book of the prophet Isaiah, a book which is our companion during Advent and which has been called the fifth Gospel, because it carries a similar message of salvation to the one we find in the Gospels of the New Testament. It was addressed to a defeated and oppressed people, Israel, but the prophet tells them there is still hope for them and new life, springing from what appeared to be a dead stump. An ideal ruler will come to free them from captivity, filled with God's spirit of wisdom, and endowed with divine counsel and knowledge and fear of the Lord. The outcome will be a *new world order*, a golden age. We are offered a vision of paradise where the natural world is at peace with itself and where people have nothing to fear.

The American folk artist Edward Hicks was so fascinated by this passage of Scripture that he painted no fewer than sixty-two versions of it, over a period of

eleven years. His painting is called *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Hicks was a Quaker minister from Pennsylvania, active in the first half of the nineteenth century. One of the hallmarks of the Quaker faith is a commitment to non-violence, expressed in a refusal to bear arms, and to a life of simplicity, self-discipline and focus on the “inner light” of God. Hicks believed in universal redemption, by the grace of God. His picture shows a group of wild and domestic animals gathered peacefully together. At the centre is an ox with enormous horns, its head turned towards a lion sitting by its side. One critic has described the expression on the face of the lion as one of “pop-eyed puzzlement. For the moment the wild beasts are behaving themselves, eating bovine food and not the little lambs.”¹ There are three children in the picture, playing among the animals, one of them tickling the nose of a leopard, another standing on the back of a lion with his arm around the neck of a tiger. The children represent innocence and freedom. At the side of the picture, in the far distance, is a group of settlers and native Americans engaged in dialogue: these are colonists led by another Quaker, William Penn, negotiating the historic treaty with the local Indians that marked the foundation of the State of Pennsylvania. Beyond the groups of animals and humans is a brilliant sky and a landscape bathed in a golden light, and the whole is a vision of the coming of God's kingdom.



¹ Elyce Feliz on Flickr
(<https://tinyurl.com/yz9e9x7s>)



Well, as they say, the rest is history. What happened to that promise of harmony that the best Quaker idealism brought to the New World? What happens to idealism anywhere in this imperfect, fragmented, physical world? Hicks has been called a “primitive” or “naïve” artist, but although his style was unschooled and his subjects unnaturally idyllic, Hicks was far from being a simpleton. He knew full well that the struggle for freedom from oppression and violence had to be an inner one, a struggle against egoism, greed, envy, slander, vengefulness. He knew that human nature, though given a fresh start and freed from political oppression, if not guided by a higher power could easily revert to savagery. He believed that only by following the light of Christ could human beings transform the way they related to one another and have any hope of creating a peaceful world. And Hicks saw an inner, divine light in the animals also, a sign that the God who created the world could intervene with great power to transform everything, to make a new heaven and a new earth.

The Old Testament prophets brought a message of hope that out of the old order and failure something new would emerge by the grace and power of God. Later, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, Paul was to write to the Romans that by keeping faith and by encouragement of everything Scripture tells us about how God has acted in the past, we are given hope for the future (Romans 15:4–13). We need to wait patiently for the coming of Christ in glory, for the fulfilment of Isaiah’s vision of a new order for creation. We must persevere and not lose heart, and we should be content to live in harmony with one another, Jew and Gentile alike, praising God for the

gift of Jesus who has been given for the whole world. In Jesus Christ, we are all one. The idea of Jew and Gentile sharing the same faith and having equal access to God would have seemed as unlikely to the first followers of Jesus as the wolf living peacefully with the lamb, or the cow and the bear eating grass together. But since the coming of Christ, the world *is* – or at least has the potential to be – a different place. Now we are in a time of waiting for the fulfilment of Scripture, a time of *hope* and also of living in the power of the Holy Spirit.

During our time of waiting for Christ, what should we be doing? How should we be filling our time? How should we be preparing the way of the Lord? Our readings suggest we need to acquire a spirituality of peacefulness, refusing to judge or condemn others; refusing to retaliate in the face of aggression; refusing to become entrenched in positions of conflict; not seeking revenge; recognising and respecting the needs of others rather than being determined to get our own way at any cost. Over the past eleven months we have been appalled by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and very fearful of its escalation. As we have watched from this latest war zone, seen the devastation and felt for the suffering of its people, we know how much our future depends on peace, and yet, in this imperfect world, nations have no other option but to defend themselves against aggressive neighbours by meeting force with force. It seems that only divine intervention can resolve human conflict.

On the Second Sunday of Advent we are reminded that a fundamental change of heart is necessary if we are to experience the coming of God’s peaceable kingdom.





This change of heart is *repentance*, without which participation in God's kingdom will not be possible. Matthew's Gospel reminds us of the need to repent *now*. There's an urgency in the call of John the Baptist; the rule of God is about to break upon the world; the words of the prophets are about to be fulfilled. John's appearance, the way he dresses and the way he behaves, quite deliberately recall the prophet Elijah. John is a new prophetic voice after centuries of silence, of patient waiting for God to act anew, and the people respond to him in large numbers. Everyone, even the religious leaders, is eager for some new thing to set them free. It's very important that even the most religious people repent and don't just rely on their position in the Synagogue as evidence of their righteousness, for God's coming activity will involve judgement as well as redemption and none will be exempt. The call must be to stop where you are and turn back to God.

As followers of Jesus, we have begun to experience the promise of the kingdom through his ministry, through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. We are baptized not only with water but also with the Holy Spirit, and we need to remain constant in faith and patient in waiting for that final coming of God, when the Spirit will winnow the committed from the uncommitted, the prepared from the unprepared, the penitent from the impenitent.

As Christians we believe that we are saved from ourselves only by the grace of God. That call to repent is itself an act of grace, and the accompanying promise we receive from God is newness of life, a life of justice and peace and love. Amen.

The picture by Edward Hicks comes from the online collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=175611>