

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Peace with God

Presented by Stuart Robinson

When the Titanic sank on April 15, 1912, it was widely held that the iceberg tore a huge gash in the 900-foot cruise ship as it made its way from Southampton to New York City. An international team of divers in the late 90s used sound waves to probe the wreckage. The damage was surprisingly small - six relatively narrow slits across the six supposedly 'watertight' holds. (USA Today 4.9.97).

A seemingly 'small' act of defiance (refusing to take God at his word once - Genesis 3), plunged humanity into the depths of sin (and dysfunction) and cut us off from the life of God. My question is this. Will God have us back? Can the relationship be restored? Is peace with God (and each other) an option?

In our household there are five children. It won't surprise you to hear that there are a wide variety of opinions on any given topic. We were all sitting on the sofas the other day, consuming large amounts of peanut butter sandwiches and raspberry cordial (the usual 'healthy' after-school fare!) The subject to hand was peace rallies - the kids had just witnessed one. And the experience had terrified them! Our afternoon summit meeting was therefore wrestling with a dilemma.

You see on the one hand, all five children are for peace and the cessation of war - but on the other, they were confronted with a group of people (albeit a small one) who were so passionate about the subject that their behaviour had become quite violent and destructive.

So one of my children says, "People should be allowed to honestly and openly share their emotions especially when hundreds if not thousands of lives are at stake."

"Yes, but how can you justify the destruction of property and people being injured in the name of peace?" was the rejoinder from another.

"Well, what about the police and the security people ...why are they allowed to use force and control techniques? That just inflames the mood."

"That's their job.." came the exasperated reply, "and what's more they're putting their own lives at risk to keep us safe... imagine what would have happened if they weren't there."

Well, you could feel the temperature in the room beginning to rise - as it were - indeed a spirit of hostility had entered the debate. Clearly it was time for dad to intervene with some gentle, calming and wise words (well at least that's what the parenting text-books would have me believe!).

Don't you just love it when you motion to speak and all eyes turn to you - 'the oracle', and you can't think of anything particularly profound to say? I guess my fallback position in these kinds of situations is "always go for the big picture."

I said, “ I don’t know what really took place in that peace rally in much the same way as I don’t fully understand all the reasons for (and against) the war in Iraq (and a dozen other hot spots for that matter)”.

“What I do know is this; aggression and violence and murder are all symptoms of a much bigger problem.” Well, the kids knew where I was going with this... but it was worth saying again.

“The bigger problem is that we live in a world which by and large has turned its back on God. Like a toddler breaking free from her mother’s hand at a busy intersection, chaos ensues.” In order to restore peace and heal the relationship (because he longs to have us back), God comes among us in the person of Jesus. What’s that ‘in vogue’ term? He ‘embeds’ himself with humanity.

Jesus is God’s special envoy - his agent of reconciliation. And he does this - he facilitates our reconciliation to God by bearing the consequences of our self-centred decisions and actions (our sin) himself.

The long term (eternal) separation from God - to which we are all headed, is embraced fully (and willingly) by Jesus.” I also tell my kids that since they’ve experienced peace with God (through Jesus’ sacrifice on their behalf), then they too need to be agents of peace.

That means no ‘paybacks’, no vendettas, no name-calling, no silent treatment and pray for those who make life difficult for you...kids in the play ground, world leaders, people who give peace rallies a bad name. The discussion ended at that point ... it was time for homework - more tough questions!

The terrible bloodshed in Iraq underscores the very obvious - all is not well in our world. But it would be naive to think that the problems are ‘across the sea and far away.’ Turmoil is crouching at our very doorstep.

I was walking through the inner-city suburb where I work as a minister (it was 8 am on a Tuesday morning); dozens of commuters (pedestrians) were making their way into the city. There was a loud scream up ahead and the screeching of tyres. A woman had just become the victim of a drive-by purse snatch. The perpetrators almost mowed me down as they fled at high speed.

The night before, just a few metres away, my friend had a rear window smashed and a laptop was removed from his car. And eight days or so before these events took place, a young man (known to some of my children) was murdered in the next suburb.

Those incidents (along with the pain of betrayal and broken promises that many of you live with daily) remind us that we are still part of a society which is shaking its fist at God - a society which continues to ignore God’s offer of peace and forgiveness and a fresh start - a society at enmity with God and each other.

Here’s a true story. On March 10, 1974, Lt. Hiroo Onada was the last World War 2 Japanese soldier to surrender. Onada had been left on the island of Lubang in the Philippines on December 25, 1944, with the command to “carry on the mission even if Japan surrenders.”

In all, four Japanese soldiers were left on the island when the Japanese evacuated Lubang. One soldier surrendered in 1950. Another was killed in a skirmish with local police in 1954. Another was killed in 1972. Onada continued his war alone. All efforts to convince him to surrender or to capture him failed. He ignored messages from loudspeakers and refused to believe the leaflets which were dropped over the jungle.

Over the years he lived off the land and stole from local farmers. He was responsible for killing at least 30 nationals during his 29 year personal war. Almost half a million (US) was spent in trying to convince him to surrender. 13,000 people were used in various schemes to track him down and apprehend him. Finally on March 10, 1974, almost 30 years after the war had ended, Onada surrendered his rusty sword after receiving a personal command from his former superior officer - who read to him the terms of the cease-fire. Onada was pardoned by the President of the Philippines. The war was over.

The point of the story is this. God offers a full, unconditional pardon to all who will surrender their 'rusty swords' (so to speak). But it is peace with God on his terms. Surrender is not a bad word, really.

Peace with God is offered freely to all who will surrender their lives (and this means the control of their lives) to the Lord Jesus. God is asking us to change sides - to move from being his enemy to his friend by receiving the pardon (or the forgiveness), which Jesus' selfless work secures for us. That is, Jesus endured death (and the hell of separation from God the Father) on our behalf.

Peace with God is offered as a gift - but it comes at a very great price; Jesus' death on our behalf. And we can be sure that Jesus' work was effective - and that the offer of peace is genuine and true - because God raised Jesus from the grave. Death could not hold him.

Max Lucado illustrates this beautifully. He writes:

"There is a story told in Brazil about a missionary who discovered a tribe of Indians in a remote part of the jungle. They lived near a large river. The tribe was friendly and in need of medical attention.

A contagious disease was ravaging the population and people were dying daily. An infirmary was located in another part of the jungle and the missionary determined that the only hope for the tribe was to go the hospital for treatment and inoculations.

In order to reach the hospital, however, the Indians would have to cross the river - a feat they were unwilling to perform.

The river, they believed, was inhabited by evil spirits. To enter the water meant certain death. The missionary set about the difficult task of overcoming the superstition of the tribe.

He explained how he had crossed the river. No luck. He led the people to the bank and placed his hand in the water. The people still would not believe him.

He walked out into the river and splashed water onto his face. The people watched closely but were still very hesitant. Finally he turned and dived into the water. He swam beneath the surface until he emerged on the other side.

Having proven that the power of the river was a farce, the missionary punched a triumphant fist into the air. He had entered the water and escaped. The Indians broke into cheers and followed him across.

Jesus saw people enslaved by their fear of a cheap power. He explained that the river of death was nothing to fear.

The people wouldn't believe him. He placed his hand on a young boy and called him back to life. The followers were still unconvinced. He whispered life into the dead body of a little girl. The people were still cynical.

He let a man spend four days in a grave and then called him out. Is that enough? Apparently not.

For it was necessary for him to enter the river, to submerge himself in the water of death before people would believe that death had been conquered. But after he did, after he came out on the side of death's river, it was time to sing, it was time to celebrate" (Lucado, Six Hours One Friday).

Jesus' resurrection from death is a cause for great rejoicing. It means that his work has been completed - that his death and separation from God has effectively (and for all time) dealt with our sin. It means that God is willing to have us back - because Jesus stood in our stead.

Peace with God (and a heart to work as an agent of reconciliation in a deeply fragmented society) is now freely available to all who will receive it.

I'd like to close our time together this morning with a short prayer. It's a prayer for peace - between us and God and for a world in turmoil. Let me encourage you to pray with me these words:

Dear Jesus, I'd like to experience peace with God. I am therefore surrendering my 'rusty sword'. Thank you for your death and resurrection on my behalf. I want to live to please you. Please use me as an agent of reconciliation and peace in this world. Thank you for hearing and answering this prayer. Amen.