

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The Prince of peace

Presented by Bob Smith

Matthew 5:9, 10

The highlight of my 33 years service as a chaplain in the Australian Army was the six months I spent as the *force assigned* chaplain for Operation Anode in the Solomon Islands. A decade ago that small Pacific nation was being torn apart by bitter conflict that had resulted in many deaths and atrocities, and had made the country ungovernable. At the request of what government remained, Australia sent a military force in to restore order, and then established the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, or RAMSI for short, to try to get the nation back on its feet.

In comparison with many other peacekeeping operations around the world RAMSI and Operation Anode has been extremely effective. part of the reason for this is that it has been more than a **peacekeeping** operation, where a lightly armed force tries to keep 2 warring sides away from each other. It has been a **peacemaking** operation, involving carefully planned and direct action not only to keep the 2 sides from fighting, but also to bring about reconciliation.

I felt very proud to have a small part in it, not only because of the professionalism of our Defence Force personnel, but also because it reminded me of one of Jesus' great statements in the Beatitudes, '***Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.***'

There is no doubt that most of the misery we experience in life comes not so much from natural causes like disease or disaster (tragic though these may be), but rather from the bitterness and hostility that infests every dimension of human interaction. Indeed, when natural disasters strike, people tend to put aside their differences and pull together in a way that often leaves them feeling the better for having gone through it. But the fracturing of human relationships is different. It feeds on itself and frequently grows into something that becomes ever uglier and nastier.

It was against this sad reality that Jesus pronounced his blessing on those who go against the trend and give themselves to the task of bringing peace between people who are in conflict. And he gave them the highest of all accolades: he said that they truly are the sons of God. Eugene Peterson translates these words like this, '*You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are , and your place in God's family.*'

Peacemaking is very much a divine work because the Scriptures tell us that God is the author of peace and reconciliation. And so it's not surprising that the blessing attached to peacemakers is to '*be called the sons of God*' because no human activity better expresses the heart of God than this.

But we should also remember that the word *peace* and the word *appeasement* are not synonymous. The peace that God desires is not necessarily *peace at any price*. Peace often comes through pain, and we should

take note that Jesus pronounces his blessing on peacemakers, not just peace-lovers. Not all peace-lovers are peacemakers. Often they are people who will allow all sorts of things to go unchecked in order to avoid conflict. But all peacemakers are peace-lovers.

One thing that is painfully obvious to everyone who wants to see the message of Christ flourish in the world is that the church in general, and its members in particular, have paid little attention to these words of the one they claim to follow. The history of the Christian church is to some extent a history of conflict, sectarianism and bitterness. It is the very antithesis of what Jesus sought when he prayed that his followers might be one, as he and God the Father are one. His prayer was that the world, seeing this oneness, so different from the divisions and hostilities that characterize human society, would come to believe simply by what they saw in the church.

But sadly, despite the best efforts of the Ecumenical Movement and all the inter-church councils and cooperative activities, that's not what most people see. I doubt if there's ever been a time in Australian society when the Church, as an institution, has had a worse public image than today. And it's not because of honest differences of opinion with regard to details of faith and practice; it's because of the spirit that underlies those differences; a spirit that in essence is no different from the spirit of the world. That's why we need to listen again to these words of Jesus, *'blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.'*

The most memorable encounter I ever had with a true peacemaker was in 1985 when I met Father Elias Chacour, a Palestinian, Melkite priest in the village of Ibillin near Nazareth. He gave me an autographed copy of his best-selling book *Bloodbrothers* that tells of his efforts to fulfill his father's final words to him, to work for peace between Jews and Palestinians.

Elias Chacour's earliest memories are of growing up in Galilee where his family lived at peace with their Jewish neighbours. But all that changed in the First Arab/Israeli War in 1949. The Israeli army destroyed his village and he, along with his younger siblings, got separated from his father and older brothers and grew up as orphans in a refugee camp, where the world forgot about them until some of them became terrorists.

Elias, however, became a Melkite priest and, following his ordination, was appointed to the Melkite church at the village of Ibillin. Before he took up his ministry he returned to the ruins of his village and found what had once been his father's orchard. There, by a special fig tree where his father had grafted 6 different types of fig together, he remembered the last words his father had said to him; *'Remember this, Elias. The Jews and the Palestinians are blood brothers, we have the same father Abraham.'*

He drove from there to the Mount of the Beatitudes by the Sea of Galilee and sat quietly, reflecting on the words of the Beatitudes, and it was the words, *'blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God'* that took hold of him, and did it so powerfully that he realised he had discovered his mission in life.

That became the start of a most amazing ministry. He began his work at Ibillin and was distressed to find that both his church and the village were torn by bitter factions, Muslim versus Greek Orthodox versus Melkite, and all of them hating the Jews. Even his own congregation was torn by strife. After months of trying to reconcile the various factions things came to a head at the Palm Sunday service. At the conclusion of the service he had all the doors padlocked before anyone could leave, and then he told them that they were a divided people who brought disgrace to Christ and confirmed everything that Jews and Muslims said about them. He gave them 2 choices: either to allow Jesus to give them power to forgive, or to stay locked in the church and kill each other; and he promised to do all their funerals for free.

The result was quite amazing. Starting with the village policeman, people began to confess their hatreds and bitterness and seek forgiveness. The trickle spread to a flood that spilled over into the whole village and began to unite Melkites, Greek Orthodox and Muslims in a desire to work for the common good.

And that was just the start. Elias went on to organise peace marches in Jerusalem where hundreds of Jews and Palestinians marched together, then fasted and prayed outside the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. He organised groups of Palestinian young people to visit a Jewish Kibbutz, and groups of Jewish young people to live for a while in Palestinian villages; seeking always to change not institutions but peoples' hearts. And beneath it all, the simple but powerful words of Jesus, *'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.'*

Jesus said, *'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.'* He then went on to say, *'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'* Or, as Eugene Petersen translates it, *'You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you deeper into God's kingdom.'*

It's no great wonder that this final beatitude about suffering for righteousness comes immediately after the one about being peacemakers. The persecution Jesus refers to is the inevitable clash between two irreconcilable value-systems. Peacemakers, by their very presence, reveal the bitterness and divisions of the world for what they are, and challenge people to aspire to something higher.

But not everyone wants to change and many prefer to hold onto their prejudices. It's what Jesus meant when he said, *'This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.'* I well remember my last Sunday in the Solomon Islands. It was the second anniversary of the RAMSI intervention and a huge open air service of thanksgiving was to be held in Honiara, at which I was to participate.

When the time came for me to leave our camp, which was about 12 ki

lometres from Honiara, I went to the operations control to get a lift into town only to have the regimental sergeant major tell me that they had received intelligence that dissidents were planning to attack RAMSI vehicles travelling along that road that night. It was clearly to show that while many people were giving thanks to God for the peacemakers, others wanted to kill them. As a result the force security measures were upgraded and no one was to be allowed out of that secure area.

I protested that this would cause some embarrassment if I were not there to do my bit at the service, particularly as the Governor General and Prime Minister of the Solomons were to attend. Fortunately the CO arrived in time to hear the conversation and told them to get me into town right away before the new force security measure came into operation; and then to send a convoy of armed soldiers to bring me home.

Well, I'm glad to say the service went off well, and two thousand people were present to give thanks to God for the peacemaking effort. 2 troop carriers, with a full infantry section, armed to the teeth, came to pick me up, and we got home safely with no incidents. But it was a reminder that peacemaking does not always bring a positive response from everyone. There are always some for whom it is an affront, and a rebuke to the darkness they choose to live in.

Since all the beatitudes describe what every Christian is intended to be, we have to conclude that being despised, rejected, slandered and persecuted, is as much a normal mark of discipleship as being pure in heart

or merciful. Martin Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church. He referred to the Church as the community of those *'who are persecuted and martyred for the Gospel's sake'*. John Wesley used to ask his preachers, on their return, how many people got saved and how many people got mad. Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not surprising that his disciples should be called on to suffer. To them it is a joy and token of his grace.

Gordon McDonald, a well known American preacher, talks about meeting a Nigerian woman who is a physician at a great teaching hospital in America. She told him her African name meant *'Child who takes the anger away.'*

When asked why they gave her this name, she said, *"My parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry. But they loved each other so much that they defied the family opinions and married anyway. For several years they were ostracized from both their families. Then my mother became pregnant with me. And when the grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away. And that's the name my mother and father gave me."*

It reminds me of what the Bible says about Jesus coming into this world to bring reconciliation between people and God, and each other. It also reminds me that, despite the price we have to pay, we are now called to do the same. ***'You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. And you're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you deeper into God's kingdom.'***