



THE METHODIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP
with the
FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION

PEACE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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A Sermon for a United Nations Association Service, 21st October 2007

Rev. Maurice Wright, Secretary of the Methodist Peace Fellowship

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a very scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

The Hebrew word for Peace, Shalom, is a very rich word. We often limit the meaning to the absence of war. That is a secondary meaning in the Bible whether Hebrew or the Greek equivalent. The primary meaning is more positive. It means security and prosperity. The root of the word is wholeness and soundness. So fundamentally it means well-being and all things good. The Old Testament picture is of a man sitting under his own fig tree. He has enough to eat, can feed his family and is free from anxiety and fear. He is in harmony with his surroundings and the community. There is of course no hint of war to disturb it all.

The Old Testament hope was that the Messiah would bring an age of peace (Isaiah 11). Some may think the New Testament is more interested in the concept of personal peace but I do not believe peace is so divisible.

A. PEACE IS THE SAME FOR ALL.

One Chinese character for peace apparently represents a woman sitting under her roof reminiscent of Shalom the Hebrew word. Whatever word is used, peace is the same in every language and for all nations. It means three things:

1. Food for the hungry.

Agriculture like almost everything else is best where there is no war and nations live in a settled and peaceful climate of trust and harmony. Much of the hunger in the world, like that in the Darfur refugee camp, has been caused or made worse by violence and war. Violent oppression in Zimbabwe has reduced a nation once an exporter of food to one where people starve. United Nations figures show 15% of the world's population, or 800 million people, suffer from chronic hunger, whilst more than a billion struggle to survive on less than 50p per day. 25,000 die every day from hunger or hunger-related causes, according to the United Nations. The only thing that would not thrive in a totally settled and peaceful climate of trust and harmony is the arms industry. Supplying arms makes wars more likely. Poorer countries buy arms using money that might be better used feeding their hungry. Sales to developing countries accounted for 80% of the market on recent figures.

In 2004, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council produced 89% of the arms exported and US aid is less than 1% of military expenditure.

2006 figures provided by the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development shows that aid from the richest 22 countries fell by 5.1 per cent compared with 2005, the first time it has fallen since 1996. On the other hand according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, world military expenditure in 2006 is estimated at \$1204 billion. This represents an increase of 3.5 per cent in real terms since 2005. That is to say aid from the richest 22 countries fell by 5.1% in 2005 while world military expenditure rose by 3.5%

Recently Oxfam and others claimed that since 1990 war has cost Africa £150b, about the same as the aid they have received. ¹

¹ The Guardian Oct 11 2007

On 25th July, the Prime Minister responded to campaigning by the Campaign against the Arms Trade, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and other peace groups and announced his intention to close the Defence Export Services Organisation (DESO), a Government unit which promoted and underwrote sales by private arms companies. How big is the carbon footprint of the military and arms producers?

2. Health for the people.

We have seen terrible pictures of hospitals in Iraq damaged by bombing and overflowing with the wounded. Doctors complained that they had no medical supplies and sometimes no electricity. Dr. Garcia of the Pan American Health Organization says war also spreads disease because it often creates large populations of refugees. Poverty and health are linked. The WHO view is, "Poverty creates ill-health because it forces people to live in environments that make them sick, without decent shelter, clean water or adequate sanitation." We sell arms and provide credit to Africa and then protect multinationals by denying cheap drugs where they are needed.

A recent Lancet paper shows more than half a million women die in pregnancy or childbirth each year despite 2 decades of effort to bring that down. Most are in the developing world and a vast majority are caused by, "avoidable or treatable conditions".²

The Iraqis have suffered desperately from war during the last 14 years and from Saddam's violence against the Kurds and Shias. As a result of the use of depleted uranium-tipped weapons, or tank busters, there have been many malformed and headless babies born and a high incidence of leukaemia.³ The Basra maternity and paediatric hospital recorded an increase in cancer cases from 80 in 1990 to 380 in 1997. More than half the Iraqi childhood leukaemia cases occurred in that region, which had less than 20% of the country's population. Combatants on both sides were also affected. General Sanchez said in October 2007 that the Iraq war "is a nightmare with no end in sight".

Voices in the Wilderness specialises in having people on the ground in Iraq. They claim, "Health is harmed by conflict-related damage to health-sustaining infrastructure and to the health system, as well as the corrosive effects of conflict-related factors such as poverty, unemployment, disrupted education and low morale. The effects of the war must be measured not only by death and injuries due to weaponry, but by the longer-term, enduring suffering".

Since WW II, at least 110 million have died in war – mostly civilians. How many more have been injured and disabled? On Friday 12 October 2007 the Armed Forces Memorial in Staffordshire was unveiled by the Queen. It commemorates all who have died in combat since 1948. There are 16000 names on it **but 15000 spaces waiting**. It does not record those who were maimed and injured. Serving soldiers horrifically injured in the Iraq and Afghan conflicts were refused permission to join the main Remembrance Day parade in 2007. The reason, bad publicity!

3. Education for the children.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child includes the right of equal access to education.⁴ There is by no means equal access to education throughout the world. In war schools are destroyed, teachers are killed and the training of teachers interrupted. Can you imagine not being able to send your children to school? Our education system has developed uninterrupted by war even though it may have been hindered by defence spending. In "This is the United Nations" published in May 2007 UN Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary-General is quoted, "The UN is needed more than ever before. The world's peoples will not be fully served unless peace, development and human rights, the three pillars of the United Nations, are advanced together with equal vigour." The rights of children are top of the list of human rights. They have a right to safety, welfare and the opportunity to grow and learn in peace.

² The Guardian Oct 12 2007

³ E.g. Maggie O'Kane - Guardian Weekly 10/199. Also various from Voices in the Wilderness (website etc.).

⁴ Article 24

B. PEACE IS THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

We feel proud as Methodists that the United Nations was inaugurated in Westminster Central Hall in January 1946. Christianity is not just a religion of private peace. It is also dedicated to the public wellbeing of all and a Kingdom of peace

1. First of all **Jesus fulfilled the hope** for Messiah though not the popular need of a national war leader – The Sun or Daily Mail view, you might call it. His was a mission to bring peace. Paul saw the meaning of his death as breaking down dividing walls. Firstly between God and us and then between those divided by race, religion, class and gender. Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Gal 3:28*). For that reason we should welcome the letter from Muslim scholars to the Pope and other Christian leaders in the Autumn of 2007 saying, “if Muslims and Christians are not at peace the world cannot be at peace.”⁵ It calls on all to spell out the common essentials and echoes Hans Kung in his book about the Global Ethic where he wrote, “There can be no peace amongst nations without peace amongst religions; No peace is possible between religions without dialogue between them.”

We must remember that Al Qaida and the like do not represent the best in Islam any more than some extreme groups represent the Christian Faith. Here is a “Christian” example. Operation Straight Up is an evangelical entertainment group providing “faith-based entertainment” for the US military and families. It is an official arm of the US defence department. A few months back it proposed to send copies of an apocalyptic video game entitled ‘**Left Behind: Eternal Forces**’ to Iraq. In the game players become commanders of an evangelical army in a post-apocalyptic landscape and battle against UN-style peacekeepers. I quote, “We feel the forces of heaven have encouraged us to perform multiple crusades that will sweep through this war torn region”. “We make no bones about the fact that we are speaking directly to the soldiers of the greatest fighting force of the world” and they add a comment, “No ‘mamsie pamsie’ stuff here!” Each time a Left Behind player kills a UN soldier, their virtual character exclaims, “Praise the Lord!” To win the game, players must kill or convert all the non-believers left behind after the rapture.⁶

The Christian faith is founded on Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace and not on the God of Battles in the Old Testament.

2. Secondly **Jesus taught a way of peace**. The value that he put on all human beings by teaching the Fatherhood of God should make hatred of one group for another, like that of the Nazis for the Jews, impossible. Auschwitz could not have happened had the teaching of Jesus been taken seriously. In *The Friend* a couple of years ago I read this, “Violence is possible when we forget the innate worth of the other person and forget the violence within”.

Jesus told the disciples, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also.” *Luke 6:27-29*, and also, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” *Matt 5:44*. There has been much argument about these sayings. Some have claimed Jesus was overstating the case to make a point. Others have maintained that it is teaching for the coming age but is impractical in the present one. You take your choice. I stand with what it says, as difficult as it is. We need to believe another unlikely word of Jesus too. The humble are blessed or happy because they inherit the earth (*Matt 5:5*). It is not the assertive and those who fight for it. Peace-makers are counted as God’s children so if we want to appear as the children of God we had better start making peace wherever we can.

Peace is not just the end result it is also the means. We have to find non-violent ways of overcoming evil. Or according to Paul, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” *Rom 12:21*. Peace is always the gift of God. It can only be received in God’s way and Jesus is God’s way. We can see in the Gospels that peace is often part of the wish and blessing of Jesus. It is at the heart of the Gospel and should flow from proclaiming the Gospel and witnessing to God’s love.

⁵ The Guardian Oct 12 2007

⁶ Source Max Blumenthal in *The Nation* (July 2007) via *The Diary* in the Guardian. See also Wikipedia – “Operation Straight Up”.

3. Paul understood that peace is at the heart of the Christian life. He lists peace among the fruits of the spirit. It is the characteristic of the spiritual life and it is the reward of the faithful. Peace flows from not being at war with ourselves or with others and most of all not being war at with God. So salvation includes the experience of peace. Peace is what Paul wishes for those reading his letters. They often begin “grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ”.

Conclusion. Can we allow the Gospel to open our eyes as we pray for peace? Open our eyes to ourselves, to the church and to the world and see a vision of peace? George Fox records in his diary what happened when they tried to enlist him, “I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.” The world believes that force can achieve anything, including peace. It is not so. Violence only begets more violence. Rev. Dr. Kenneth Greet, Vice-President of the World Disarmament Campaign and President of the Methodist Peace Fellowship wrote, “The nations are still mesmerised by the myth that military might guarantees security”.

Gains in war are often short lived. Emperor Chin reigned in all 37 years and unified China, not without some brutality. He made all the terracotta warriors and surrounded himself with many weapons. Within 4 years of his death aged 49 his son had been stabbed to death and all his work was crumbling. 13 years after his death all the warriors’ weapons had been stolen.

There is a better way. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” *Rom 12:18*. We have been good at providing schools, building hospitals and erecting churches for converts but more must be done in peacemaking and conflict resolution. They too are part of our mission work at home and in the world church.

Finally a story. A young UNICEF worker witnessed villagers arguing over the ownership of 2 camels. At the end of the argument, the camels went free – but 20 people were shot dead!

Prayer.

Father of all, when we call your son the Prince of Peace help us to accept what that means. May we learn that peace is your will for us, for your church and for the world so that all may enjoy the quality of life we have come to expect; care in sickness, enough food to eat and education for the young. Amen

Requests for more copies, notification of change of address etc. to Rev. Maurice H. Wright (MPF Secretary), 3, Cornwall Drive, Bayston Hill, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, SY3 0EP, 01743 873633 mhw@surfree.co.uk. If you use email and would prefer to receive P21C that way please ask, it will save postage. Donations to cover costs are welcome, please see below. As we commission articles from different people, not all Methodists, there may be fees in addition to postage and printing.

I apologise for the late delivery of the last edition. It was apparently due to the mother of all muddles by the Post Office in Bala and elsewhere. It went to the printers in August but was finally franked by the PO on 25th November after lying about in bags and being found in Wolverhampton! Email copies went out in August. This has delayed the present one. We hope to have a paper from Alan Litherland in the future.

Love and peace *Maurice*

Postscript. The UK licensed more than £10m of arms exports to Kenya in 2007, including semi-automatic pistols, military helmets and civil body armour (that’s for 9 months). That should help!!!⁷

RESPONSE FORM

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⁷ The Guardian 11/1/08 (Diary)