

**St Columba
Advent 2, 5 December 2010**

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Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

Peace beyond all understanding!

Introduction to readings:

Isaiah 11:1-10: This reading comes from a time of terror for the Israelites. There was great fear of the marauding Assyrian army and its plundering and destruction. Isaiah offers a vision of peace – a vision of a time when the fear will subside and be replaced with stability and peace as God moves amongst the people. Isaiah’s vision is of a time when people know that the wellbeing of nature, political and social life and humanity are inter-linked. It is a vision filled with symbols and imaginative pictures.

Matthew 3:1-12: As we are called to do in Advent, John the Baptist considers his world and does not like what he sees. “You brood of vipers” he calls the Pharisees and Sadducees, scholars of the Torah and guardians of religious and cultural protocols. Beware all who do not live according to God’s covenant. He declares that saying sorry is not enough. Lives must be changed; there must be a turning away from lives of sin. He adds urgency to his preaching by declaring that “one much more powerful than me is coming – they had better get ready now.” And he calls all those who want to avoid destruction to seek God and to prepare a way in the wilderness – to make the lumpy and crooked paths straight so no-one is prevented from reaching God and the kingdom of heaven with its notion of justice and kindness for all who enter.

Both readings are filled with images and symbols.

The theme for today is *peace*. We are very familiar with the blessing that is used in Church that starts

“May the peace of God that passes all understanding fill your hearts and minds”

I have often wondered how it is that I am supposed to make sense of that, if it is beyond all understanding!

I’ve wondered what I am being wished.... what this peace is?

How much use is it to me if I can’t understand it?

Since my youth I have thought a lot about peace... what to do to achieve it, what it might feel like....

As a child it was in gladness that the war was over and my Dad would not have to go off and fight... I was glad it was peace time.

As a mother I was afraid that my children would be called to fight in a war and was glad that we lived in what was euphemistically called 'peace-time'! It was relief.

But as I grew older I became aware that while there may be no war that my nearest and dearest were fighting in, and no war in our country.... there have been wars all over the world... millions of people have died through direct involvement in the fighting or as 'collateral damage. Somehow the idea of 'peace' readily gets linked to 'no war'.

But it is more than that... more than no war...

In as much as it is in no aggression and no violence, that there is peace, there can also be peace when multinational corporations cease to damage the economies of small countries and the capacity of indigenous peoples like those in Tonga to feed themselves.

And we pray for the coming of a time of peace in the world just as earnestly as those Israelites that Isaiah was talking to. But for us too, a time of world peace goes beyond rational expectation.

It makes a much sense as lions lying with lambs and leopards with baby goats and children playing with snakes!

When we look around our world with all the pain and anguish that there is, we know that despite the prayers of people over centuries, the prayers of people across all religions and no religion – peace in our world let alone in our time is still very hard to imagine!

The reading from Isaiah however is inviting us to do just that. To push our imagination beyond the limits of what we know as possible, and to dream for a while of a time when all creatures are in harmony,

- when social and political structures all converge in the interests of the wellbeing of the earth and its inhabitants – human and non-human...
- when those with power face up to climate change, and the need for enough food to feed a hungry world,
- when they face the urgency of protecting our seas and fish stock,
- when people everywhere are able to live with dignity...
- when leopards lie down with lambs and lions eat straw.

Today we are urged to employ our imagination

We are urged to imagine a world where there is peace... to find the feeling within ourselves that we know as peace.

But what is this peace?

We are told it is beyond all understanding

But not beyond the capacity of our imagination!

It isn't enough to leave it there.... in our imagination...

Or say from the safety of our small, peaceful, south pacific nation that

We are sorry there is so much strife in the world; sorry other countries are being swamped by rising sea levels; frozen by changing climate; starved because of drought and cash crops planted to feed the developed world.

In as much as John the Baptist demanded repentance from those who came to be baptised by him – repentance that required a change in the way they lived and related to others – so too the call is to us to repent, to change our ways of living.

- The call to us is to live as if the heaven has come near
- To live as if lions eat straw and leopards and lambs lie down together
- To live in ways that produce good fruits: love, kindness, gentleness, generosity, friendliness, self-control

The big wide world is too big for most of us to engage with; world peace is too big an agenda for us to feel we can have any part of.

Yet we can all choose to live more gently on this earth, more considerately, more respectfully.

If we do this, then we help our world move one step closer to the peace the angels sang about in the story of the first Christmas – it may be beyond our understanding but it is not beyond our imagining.