

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Advent 2A, Dec 4, 2016
Isaiah 11:1-10**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

On August 15, 1998 29 people were killed and over 200 more were injured by a car bomb in Northern Ireland. Attempts at cease-fires and peace-building between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland had been on-going for many years by then and that bombing was an attempt to once again de-stabilize the region following a peace agreement that had been made 4 months earlier and had been ratified by referendum 3 months earlier. It has been described as the single worst incident in Northern Ireland during the conflict and contrary to the goals of the attackers, it may well have been the final straw for a people sick and tired of violent conflict. The peace agreement stuck and now, almost 20 years later, the conflict in Northern Ireland is a sad memory.

Among the many who were devastated by that particular bombing and found themselves at the end of their tolerance for conflict were members of the Irish rock band U2. In the aftermath they wrote a heavily ironic lament titled "Peace on Earth" released in 2000. The song begins: "Heaven on earth; we need it now; I'm sick of all of this; hanging around; I'm sick of sorrow; I'm sick of the pain; I'm sick of hearing; again and again; that there's gonna be; peace on earth..." The song continues by reflecting the way in which conflict too often escalates, damaging everyone's soul: "Where I grew up; there weren't many trees; where there was; we'd tear them down; use them on our enemies; they say that what you mock; will surely overtake you; then you become a monster; so the monster will not break you..." The lament finally culminates with the urgent plea: "Jesus can you take the time, to throw a drowning man a line, peace on earth..."

Around the time U2 was writing that song, I was serving on the Partners in Mission committee of our National Church. One of the people I met who left a lasting impression was an Indian man who had started a centre for peace. He worked in an area of India that had a roughly equal mix of Christians, Muslims and Hindus and had sustained much conflict as a result. The only detail I really remember was his passionate contention that "a moment comes," he said, "when the human soul cries out for peace." That is when peace-building can truly begin. His words that have stayed with me, particularly in times when I feel despair about entrenched conflict and senseless violence... a moment comes when the human soul cries out for peace. "Jesus can you take the time, to throw a drowning man a line, peace on earth..."

When I was on a pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine in 2008, I had the distinct privilege of meeting a formerly orthodox Jewish man whose soul, like that of U2, had reached a breaking point and cried out for peace. As with all young people, he had been conscripted into the Israeli army, but as a religious person, he was assigned to a non-combat unit. His job was recovering bodies following bombings of all kinds, and returning them to the deceased's family. What he learned in the process was that to a parent of a broken child, the cause of the death does not matter. In the end, it didn't matter - he said - if it was a terrorist bus bombing or a military

missile strike... the grief of a parent over the death of a child is the same. Mothers cry and fathers weep. All are united in their basic humanity and in their desperate need for senseless violence to end. It was seeing the common humanity of Palestinians and Israelis, of Jews and Muslims and Christians alike, that caused this young soldier to see the critical need for peace on earth.

His contribution to that end took the form of a peace-building organization called Kids4Peace. It's an organization that takes children from religious families - Christian, Jewish and Muslim - and brings them together in a summer camp to get to know each other. The idea is that if these children see, understand and experience the common humanity they share with those who differ from them - indeed those who are supposed to be their enemies simply by the accident of birth - then their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours will change. It is an approach to national and international peace, one child and one family at a time. I remember this man explaining that he didn't have exalted expectations of the program, but hoped and prayed that maybe, just maybe, when one of those Jewish children grew up, for instance, and found themselves as a soldier manning a checkstop at the wall, they would treat a Muslim or Christian Palestinian trying to pass through with dignity and respect rather than abuse. It is a small thing, perhaps, but it is such small acts kindness, born out of an understanding of shared humanity, that are the ground of hope for peace on earth.

In 1993, Nelson Mandela was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, along with South African President Frederik Williem de Klerk, for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime and laying the foundation for a new and democratic South Africa. The following year he won the South African Presidency and during his 5 years as President, he worked hard for national reconciliation. While now celebrated as a great statesman, Mandela was first a freedom fighter. He was called a terrorist and indeed was imprisoned for 27 years for sabotage and conspiracy to violently overthrow the government. While admitting to some of the charges and denying others, Mandela never forsook the political cause or his ideals of equality and justice for all. At his trial he is famously quoted as concluding a speech in his own defence with: "But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." The peace for which Mandela is rightly celebrated came only after decades of protest - peaceful, violent, militant, national and international - by a great many people, against a system of injustice based on racism. In South Africa, peace could not have been achieved without truth being told about the injustice, pain and violence on the road to get there. This was not just true for South Africa... it is true everywhere. There is no peace without justice. And neither are possible without the sacrificial love of forgiveness. Living peace with justice through sacrificial love is Mandela's greatest legacy and one which we can strive to model in our quest for peace on earth.

Today we heard a vision of peace on earth from the ancient prophet Isaiah. Its proclamation of the coming reign of God is presented in 2 ways. The first involves a change in the sociopolitical order with the birth or ascension of a new and ideal king from the line of David. This spiritual hope was firmly and literally grounded in history. It was no esoteric dream but rather a fervent expectation for the national renewal of Judah. The hope was grounded in God's promise of an everlasting kingdom in David's line and here Isaiah outlines the character of the type of leader being sought. It includes having a "spirit of wisdom and understanding; a spirit of counsel and might; a spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." These are some of the

characteristics that would indicate having the spirit of the Lord and the actions that follow include standing up for the poor and the meek of the earth. There is no peace without justice and so seeking justice for the oppressed is a necessary component of working for peace on earth.

The second way the coming reign of God will be apparent according to Isaiah involves a change “in the order of creation with the establishment of peace and tranquility among all creatures, including predators and their prey.” (NIB, 140) The logic of the order is that the rule of justice in human society is followed or paralleled by a change in creation. The change is that all beings, including small children and domestic animals, will finally live in safety and security: “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.” It is a beautiful vision of serenity and security. It is a beautiful vision of peace on earth.

At the turn of the millennium, U2 pleaded in song: “Jesus can you take the time, to throw a drowning man a line... peace on earth.” It is a plea that has been sung again and again in the face of violence and despair, in the face of national devastation and personal tragedy. Today we wonder when and how peace may come in Syria as we hear far too often about bombings, refugees and all manner violence. To date, upwards of 3-400,000 people have died in the conflict, far too many of whom are civilians. I wonder who will emerge as the great peacemakers of this time, this place, this conflict? I wonder how long it will take for enough human souls cry out for peace to make it so? “Jesus can you take the time, to throw a drowning man a line... peace on earth.”

As we prepare for God’s Incarnation into our world, our community and our lives, let this be our plea. May we actively seek to recognize the common humanity we share not just with our families and our friends, but with those who differ from us, with those who hurt us and even with those who seem like our enemies. May we seek peace with justice through the practice of sacrificial love. May our souls cry out for peace on earth.