**The Pursuit of Peace**

**Luke 2:1-14**

If we had to relate one word to the Christmas message, I wonder what it would be? There’s quite a few possibilities, I suppose: we might choose ‘Joy’, or ‘Celebration’, or ‘Wonder’. But probably high up the list for all of us would be the word ‘Peace’.

Whatever else Christmas is about, we know that it is a message of Peace. And that word comes time and time again in the Bible readings we hear and in the carols we sing. We sing Silent Night: sleep in heavenly peace. We sing It came upon the midnight clear: peace on earth. We sing Hark the herald angels sing: peace on earth. We read in the prophet Isaiah that the Messiah will be the Prince of Peace and so on.

Peace is at the heart of the Christmas message - and it something that we all long for in our lives.

We come to church at Christmas for many different reasons. But on some level for all of us, there is still the hope, still the belief, that Peace is an attainable goal and we don’t want to lose touch with that possibility…

Peace in our world: to live in a world without pain, a world without fear, a world without war and hatred.

Peace in our community: for Enfield to be a place hallmarked by friendship and mutual concern, where any loneliness and pain is immediately met by the care of concerned neighbours.

Peace in our families: where there are no misunderstandings but only mutual respect and love, care and compassion.

Peace in our hearts: a time when we have learnt to love ourselves and forgive ourselves for past errors and are able to enjoy who we are with self-confidence and high self-esteem.

We long for peace.

But the truth is, that for many of us, peace seems a long way off. For some of us, this may have been a very difficult year, far from peaceful, full of hurt and pain. I have spent time with many of you this year as you have gone through some very dark and difficult times. As we look around our world, we may be forgiven for thinking that peace will never come: Syria, Afghanistan, the streets of Paris, the beaches of Tunisia, the skies above Egypt. And Bethlehem: which one us would seek a peaceful sanctuary there tonight?

It was the poet Henry Longfellow who once wrote this:

“I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play,

And wild and sweet the words repeat,

Peace on earth good will towards men.

In despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth I said,

But hate is strong

And mocks the song of peace on earth good will towards men.”

We long for peace – but it is so hard to find…

We long for peace – but the truth is, no matter how hard we try, we can’t manufacture it ourselves. It doesn’t matter how many New Year’s Resolutions we make next week, it doesn’t matter how determined we are in 2016 to be a peaceful people, we ourselves won’t be able to manufacture the Peace we are pursuing.

And here’s the reason why…Because the Christmas message is simply this: we cannot manufacture Peace. Instead, Peace comes to us.

If we want to know peace in our lives, we need to first allow Peace to find us.

And who brings Peace to us? The Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. The Christmas message is all about the Prince of Peace coming to us, coming to live amongst us, bringing us peace, teaching us to walk in the ways of peace.

If we want to live in a peaceful world, if we want to live in a peaceful community, if we want our family to be hallmarked by peace, if we want to know peace in our hearts…we can’t manufacture that. We need to let the Prince of Peace come and dwell amongst us, full of grace and truth, and allow his presence in our lives, in our community, in our society, to bring all the peace we need.

When Christ dwells amongst us, then we know peace. When the Spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts, then we know peace.

In the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, the Risen Christ says this: “I stand at the door and knock. If you will open the door I will come in and I will eat with you and you will eat with me.” Each one of us has an invitation from God tonight to open the door of our heart and allow him in. And, as we receive Christ, so we will know his peace in our lives.

And, as we experience his peace and allow that to shape who we are, so our world will be transformed. Because we will want to see that peace spread amongst those whom we love and we will want to see the world hallmarked by justice and truth.

Our concern will be for justice and truth: making sure there is adequate care for the poor, the vulnerable, the lonely, the homeless, the refugee, those on the margins of our society.

And not just justice in our wider society – but the deepening of love in our families too; treating each member of our family with respect and equal compassion and care.

And as we experience the peace of Christ in our hearts, we will see our own world transformed. We may come to know what it means to forgive those who have hurt us. We may see broken relationships being restored. We may discover within ourselves a renewed hope for the future.

So Christmas is all about peace. Not some fairy-tale type of peace. Not some pie-in-the-sky type of peace. But a real, deep, pragmatic peace that is brought to us by Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. A type of peace that will transform our hearts.

And as we are transformed, so this peace will transform our families, our communities, our world as we pursue justice and truth in the name of God.

A few minutes ago, I quoted this from Longfellow:

“And in despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth I said,

For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will toward men.”

Well, perhaps that is a somewhat depressing thought to have at Christmas. But Longfellow doesn’t end there: he goes on to write this:

“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep,

God is not dead nor doth he sleep,

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,

With peace on earth, good will toward all.”

That is the hope we share for the world. That is the hope we share for our community and our family. That is the hope we share for ourselves. That wrong shall fail and right prevail. That is the Christmas hope we share in tonight…

Our prayer is that we know the peace of God tonight in a new and transformative way that re-energises us and brings glory to his name.

And then we will truly have engaged with the Christmas message. Amen.