

## MATT 5.9: HAPPY ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

[Chelmsford 13 November 2011]

Just this week I read of a visiting minister who turned to greet his neighbour in the pew with ‘*The Peace of the Lord*’, and received the immediate response ‘*I don’t believe in it*’.

Sadly, not everybody has welcomed the re-introduction of the so-called ‘unpeaceful peace’ into the communion service. I am told that even in our church there are some who would prefer not to have to stand up and greet their neighbour. And as for holding hands as we say the Grace together at the end of the service, ‘Oh, for Goodness sake’, why on earth do we have to do that?’

My friends the giving of the peace and the holding of hands while we pray for one another in the words of the Grace are all about relationship building, and relationship building is what Jesus was on about when he said: “**Blessed are the peacemakers**” – or as the GNB puts it: “**Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children**” (Matt 5.9).

Yes, the seventh beatitude is all about relationship-building.

And anything which can help us strengthen relationships in our church is surely to be welcomed!

Let me explain: the giving of the peace at the communion service has a double-origin.

- On the one hand, it is a modern way of fulfilling the command which we find repeatedly in Paul’s letters to “**greet one another with a holy kiss**” (e.g. 1 Cor 16.20; 2 Cor 13.12), or as Peter put it, “**Greet one another with the kiss of Christian love**”. (1 Pet 5.14). The modern ‘peace’ is a way of God’s people expressing their love and affection for one another.
- But the peace is also an opportunity for people to get right with one another. For just a few verses further on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: “**If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God**” (Matt 5.23,24).

Now although Jesus was not there talking about temple worship rather than the Lord’s Supper, nonetheless there is an underlying principle which is highly relevant: namely, a precondition for worship is that we are at peace with one another.

The fact is that from time to time people within the family of God do fall out with one another – for where two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name, disagreements are bound to arise. And when that happens, relationships need to be put right. For God will not listen to our prayers, when relationships are out of kilter.

This you may remember was the case in the church at Corinth, where one group in the church was being overlooked by another - with the result that Paul wrote: “**If people do not recognize the meaning of the [Lord’s body when they eat bread and drink from the cup, they bring judgment on themselves as they eat and drink**” (1 Cor 11.29). Sort yourselves out, says Paul – make peace with one another - rebuild your relationships with one another. The giving of the peace at communion is a sign that relationships are back to normal again – as we say ‘*The Peace of the Lord be yours*’, we are seeking to bless our brother or our sister.

The holding of hands with one another as we say the Grace together is similar exercise in relationship-building. For the fact is that we only hold hands with those whom we love. And it is in this context of love for one another that we go on to pray God's blessing upon one another.

So let us move to considering the seventh beatitude: **“Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children”**.

## **GOD CALLS US TO WORK FOR PEACE**

Before I begin to unpack this beatitude, notice three things:-

***First, Jesus is not calling us to be peace-loving, but to be peace-making***

- He does not say *“Blessed are those who desire peace”*.
- Nor does he call us to be peaceable – he does not say *“Blessed are those who mind their own business”, “who do not cause trouble”*.

No, this beatitude is about making relationships stronger and better.

**“Happy are those who WORK for peace”**

Or as the hippies of the 1960s used to say, *“Make love, not war”*

***Secondly, peace-making is not necessarily something we do to others.***

Yes, we may sometimes be called to be a broker of peace – there are times when we are called to mediate between estranged parties. But sometimes we may be more directly involved – we may be one of the parties who are at logger heads.

Whatever the situation, we are called to work for peace – or as Peterson puts it in *The Message*, our task is to *“show people how to co-operate instead of compete or fight”*

***Thirdly, peace-making is not limited to the world-stage***

Today is Remembrance Sunday, a day when we remember the fallen of past wars.

But war is not simply in the past, it is in the present.

Just think of all the fighting and all the unrest that is going on today.

There is an urgent need for peace-makers.

But the fact is that none of us are players on the world-stage.

We are a bunch of ordinary Chelmsfordians.

There is no way in which our efforts could meaningfully contribute to world peace.

Nor for that matter are most of us in a position to contribute to relationships on a national level.

BUT there are more localized areas of life where we can be peace-makers – at home, at work, and at church. So within that three-fold context hear the words of Jesus: **“Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children”**.

God wants each one of us to work for good relationships in the various worlds in which he has placed us.

What does it mean for us to make peace in our church, in our work, in our home?

## 1. *Peacemaking leads to harmony*

If you look up the word 'peace' in a dictionary, you will see it defined as "*freedom from war; cessation of war*". In our language peace is a negative word: it means "no war".

So for instance, if fighting were to stop in Afghanistan, we would say that peace had returned, in spite of the fact that the land was devastated, and the economy was destroyed.

But for a Jew – and remember that Jesus was a Jew - peace is a positive term.

Peace denotes not the absence of war, but rather all that is good and worthwhile in life.

Peace is about well-being. To pray for peace is to pray for blessing.

When Jews greet one another with the word '*Shalom*', they are not wishing one another a day free from trouble, but rather they are wishing one another a good day, where everything goes well.

One popular commentator (Charles Allen) has compared this positive concept of peace to a lovely garden. He writes: "*You may clear some plot of land of every noxious weed, but that will not make it a garden. It will only be a barren field. It becomes a garden when flowers are growing there*".

Or in relationship terms, peace does not come when a couple are no longer fighting one another – it only comes when there is joy and laughter in the marriage, where there is love and, trust.

The same is true of relationships at work. Peace is not about workers not striking, but rather about the workforce feeling valued and fulfilled.

To work for peace is to work for the best of relationships.

So, here in the church I have developed a team covenant for the ministry team.

As part of that covenant we have agreed the following with one another:-

- *Mutual care. We will model the kind of relationships that ideally should characterise the life of the church in general. We will love one another, pray for one another, honour one another, care for one another, encourage one another, speak the truth in love to one another, and at all times forgive one another. We will be there for one another, come hell or high water.*
- *Positivity. In our relationships with one another – and indeed with the rest of the church – we will always exude a positive spirit. We will shun negative talking and thinking. We will instead affirm one another and will speak well of one another.*
- *Faith: We will strengthen one another's hope and faith in God, and we will foster each other's passion for Christ. We will be bold in the way we develop our various ministries – and where there are failures, we will help one another to learn and then to use the failure as a stepping board for fresh advances.*

Peace-making involves creating harmony.

My mind goes to Paul's prayer in Rom 15 which I read out at last Sunday evening's Word Alive: "**May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**" (Rom 15.5,6).

This prayer comes at the end of a section where Paul has been dealing with differing points of view – live in harmony with one another he says – and allow your differences to redound to God’s glory. A lovely thought.

## 2. *Peace-making involves justice*

True peace is not just dependent upon right relationships – it is also dependent on just relationships. It was Oliver Cromwell who said: *“If we will have peace without a worm in it, lay we the foundations of justice and righteousness”*.

In saying this Cromwell was simply reflecting the biblical truth that there is a close connection between peace and righteousness.

- For instance, in Psalm 85.10 in the context of a prayer for the nation’s welfare, the Psalmist speaks of **“righteousness and peace”** embracing one another.
- Significantly in Isaiah 32.17 we read: **“the effect of righteousness will be peace”** (NRSV).
- James speaks of **“goodness”** (GNB) or **“righteousness”** (NRSV) as being **“the harvest that is produced from the seeds that peacemakers plant in peace”** (James 3.18)

In other words, we should not seek peace at any price.

Peace is not the same as appeasement

Peace-making involves getting at the roots of disagreement

Peacemaking does not involve shoving the past under the carpet, but rather enabling the parties to face up to the past and deal with the past.

Relationships are not restored when people resolve to simply forget the past, but rather when people repent for the past.

Peace-making is not just about pouring oil on troubled waters.

It is about being real and realistic about difference.

To return to our ministry team covenant, we have a clause which states

- *Honesty. In our thoughts and our feelings we will be honest with one another. If something has upset us, then we will surface it, recognizing that ‘Today’s niggles could be tomorrow’s resentment, and next week’s breakdown’.*

We don’t get peace by pretending – we face up to difference of opinion, and where we have upset one another, we apologise, we say sorry.

Right relationships can only be created when they are just relationships

## 3. *Peace-making can be painful*

Making peace is not an easy calling. When the young Moses tried to reconcile two Hebrews

who were arguing with one another, neither thanked him for his trouble. Instead they ganged up against him "**Who made you a ruler and judge over us?**" (Ex 2.14).

A reminder that the activities of a peace-maker can all too easily be misunderstood - particularly when the peace-maker seeks to deal with the cause, and not just the symptoms. Who do you think you are? What right have you got to interfere in concerns that are not your own?

Yes, peace is often achieved only through pain.

It's a painful - sometimes distasteful - business listening to people fighting with one another.

It's a painful business seeking to broker peace between two individuals who are at loggerheads.

It is even more painful if we are actually one of one of the parties involved.

NB John Stott: *"When we are ourselves involved in a quarrel, there will be either the pain of apologizing to the person we have injured or the pain of rebuking the person who has injured us. Sometimes there is the nagging pain of having to refuse to forgive the guilty party until he repents. Of course a cheap peace can be bought by cheap forgiveness. But true peace and true forgiveness are costly treasures. God forgives us only when we repent. Jesus told us to do the same: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17.3). How can we forgive an injury when it is neither admitted nor regretted?"*

#### **4. Peace-making is divine**

**"Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children".**

I.e. God, who is the supreme peacemaker, will own us as his children when we get involved in the peace-making business.

Like father, like son - we sometimes say. As followers of the Lord Jesus, we are called to live like children of God, which means that we are called to be peacemakers..

Yes, as we gather around the Table later in this service we shall celebrate that Jesus is "**our peace**" (Eph 2.14). He is the one who makes peace not only between God and humankind, but also the one who breaks down those barriers that we erect between one another: he "**has broken down the dividing wall, i.e. the hostility between us**" (Eph 2.14). He has done that "**through the cross**" (2.16).

The fact is that we go about working for peace, as we seek to create and improve relationships, we are in fact doing the business of God. Peace-making is indeed divine.