

“WHERE RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PEACE KISS”

Psalm 85:1-13

“*Jesus is the answer*”. That’s a slogan that is imprinted on the minds of many. During the 60s and 70s it was plastered all over the literature of the “Jesus People”, it shouted from the t-shirts of church youth groups, and it was sung loudly and popularly by Jessy Dixon and Paul Simon. In more recent years it has been offered as a universal panacea by all kinds of well-meaning Christian evangelists. Whatever the question, whatever the problem, whatever the issue, “*Jesus is the answer*”. And there’s no doubting that it’s true – so long as we make at least some attempt to understand the question.

And like so many other catchy phrases and trite clichés, the familiarity of it dulls our senses to its real and undeniably true meaning. Yes, Jesus **is** the answer – although you’d expect me to say that. In some ways, everything that is said from this pulpit eventually boils down to that. And everything we read in the Bible eventually boils down to that as well. There, at the centre point of history, “*towering over the sands of time*” as the hymn writer puts it, is the cross of Jesus, the symbol of God’s care and compassion for this broken world. Jesus died on the cross of Calvary in order that all men and women should be able to experience forgiveness and reconciliation – with one another and, more crucially, with God.

The heart of the Christian gospel is that Jesus came into our world – the Almighty, Creator God in the form of a human being – and lived, taught, died and lived again so that the power of evil could be conquered and our fear of death could be overcome. Turn to more or less any page in the New Testament, sift through the preaching of the Hebrew prophets and you’ll see that’s the message. Jesus saves. Jesus is the answer. There is a Kingdom of righteousness and peace which has been made possible by the life and death of the Messiah. The Psalm we read from earlier points to that Kingdom in vv10-13. It’s a vision of society and community that, no doubt, we all look at with a great deal of longing – and some of you here this morning are trying your hardest, I’m sure, to help that along by your efforts within our community. It’s God’s desire that this Kingdom of *shalom* should be brought about and it was his plan that it should be accomplished by the death and resurrection of his Son. (*Shalom* is that wonderful Hebrew word that is translated in our Bibles as “*peace*” but which encompasses so much more than that single English word – it also includes wholeness, contentment, well-being, prosperity, joy: life as God intended it to be.)

But that happened more or less two thousand years ago. Jesus lived and died out there in Palestine twenty centuries ago. He has done what was promised. The death that was to overcome evil has taken place. The resurrection that was to break the hold of death and decay over our world has happened. Jesus has shouted out the answer from the cross and from the Easter garden. But where is the Kingdom of *shalom*? Why is our world, our nation, our community here not characterised by “*love and faithfulness*”? Why do we not live in a place where “*righteousness and peace kiss each other*”? There is still crime, there is still suffering, there is still inequality, there is still unfaithfulness, corruption, disease, despair. If God’s plan was that this should all be eradicated through the life and death of Jesus, why do we see things as they are? Why does God allow it? Why is there not revival within churches and a spreading of the influence of Christ throughout our world? If Jesus is the answer, why is the world the way it is?

That’s a question that is often asked by those who have little or no sympathy with the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who want to score points off folk who claim to have a faith in Jesus and who protest their allegiance to him. Why do you do it? What’s the point? But I reckon there are those who are Christians who in their bleaker moments – and, indeed, not so bleak moments – ask the same question. Where is this Kingdom of *shalom* that God has promised? Why are we waiting? The cry of God’s songwriters from the Psalmists to U2 has been “*How long?*” We are asking the questions but Jesus does not seem to be answering.

I said that it's been a cry of God's people for centuries, from even before Jesus Christ walked this earth in human form. And the Psalm we have read this morning is one such example. God's people, the people of Israel, had been deported, carried away into exile by the superpower of the time, Babylonia. Their country had been overrun, their buildings and institutions destroyed, their political and religious infrastructure decimated. And for seventy years they had lived in a far country, pining for their homeland and for their community. Now they had been brought back from that exile through the intervention of Babylon's new conquerors, Persia. They are home, back in the land of their birth, their heritage; the land of God's promise. God appears to have forgiven them and restored them.

But life is still far from easy. The towns and cities need to be rebuilt – not least among them the city of Jerusalem and the symbol of their national and religious identity, the Temple. There's a hint here that there's been a drought (which would tie in with the words of the contemporary prophet Haggai). The community of *shalom* which they were expecting has not materialised. Yet God had promised it, hadn't he? He has brought them back from exile. He has forgiven them. He appears to have turned his anger away from them. All those things he said he'd do – and yet there's still no peace and righteousness.

And the people cry out to him in the words of vv4-7. "Come on, God. Give us a break. Restore us. Revive us. You're supposed to be the answer, so where's the evidence of it." It seems almost as if the job's only half done. They want to see and experience the kingdom of *shalom*. They want to know peace, to see righteousness, to receive all the good things God has promised, to have a full harvest again. Just like we do, they hope for, *long* for a place where righteousness and peace kiss, where love and faithfulness meet together.

And the Psalmist confirms that "*God promises shalom to his people, his saints.*" It's what God himself says. There can be no doubting it, then. He promises his salvation – a way out of the mess they appear to be in. And he still promises salvation today. He promises that we will know freedom from the fear of death, liberation from the consequences of our sins, our wrong decisions and wrong choices. He promises an end to frustration, to dissatisfaction, to lack of fulfilment, to despair. He offers hope and peace. He promises all this through Jesus – it's there in the Bible. Its most potent symbol is that empty cross, the seal on God's promise of salvation.

But there's a couple of phrases here that start to give us a clue as to what's going on. Yes, God **has** promised *shalom* to his people, "*but let them not return to their folly*". The promise of God holds good, so long as we don't mess it up. Imagine a child with a toy – maybe one of those toys he's just had for Christmas. He's been messing about with it and it gets broken. He comes to you and pleads for it to be mended. (Notice I'm saying "you", not "me". Those of you who know me will realise that no-one, however innocently or naively, comes to me to ask for anything to be mended.) You manage to get it all back together again and off he trots with the toy, returned to its original state of pristine newness. But a little while later he comes back again. "You promised to mend it, and look, it's broken again." You mend it again, but this time follow him and watch as he uses the toy in a way that was never intended. Of course, it breaks again.

God created a world, a universe, of *shalom*. "*And God saw that it was good*", we read in the account of creation after each day's activity. It worked fine, just as God wanted it to. But the people to whom he entrusted it messed it up, used it for the wrong purposes, ignored the Maker's Instructions. And God had to try and put it right. The Old Testament is an account of how God tried again and again to get things back on track – but human beings kept "*returning to their folly*", and it kept getting fouled up. The *shalom* was spoiled. But again and again God kept his promise to put it right.

Eventually, he sent his Son Jesus. And as he prepared the way for his own death, as he explained patiently to listeners who could never quite grasp it, he tried to make it plain that this was the last chance, this was God's final offer, God's ultimate demonstration that he was keeping his promise. As he hung on the cross, humiliated and in agony before a jeering world, he cried "*It is finished!*" This is the fulfilment,

the fulfilment of God's promise. Don't return to your folly! But we do, don't we? We still think we know best how to build a world of peace – as heavily armed peace-keepers patrol the trouble spots of the world and our economies are built on the profits of weapons sales. We still think we know best how to encourage righteousness – as corruption stalks the corridors of power, more or less openly in every nation of the world. We still think we know how to fill the world with love – except that we have somehow confused love with lust, and replaced co-operation with competition. We still think that we know how to live a life of faithfulness – except that we just don't seem to have the courage to stick to our word when there are so many opportunities for deceit.

God gave us his Maker's Instructions in the form of Ten Commandments. But we find it so hard to stick to them. We prefer our folly, our short-sightedness, our ignorance, our rebellion. "OK," said God. "It's tough. I'll make you a promise, though. The past is over with, sorted out, done for. You're forgiven and I'll prove that by allowing my own Son to take on himself all the consequences of that past. You can now live in *shalom* – no problem. Just don't mess up again." But we have – that's why we have to keep on and on crying out "*Restore us again, O God our Saviour.*" If we do – and we mean it, really mean it (what the Bible calls "repentance") – then we can begin to experience some of that *shalom* in our own lives.

But that's where the second phrase comes in. The Psalmist writes "*Surely his salvation is near those who fear him.*" So many people just don't "*fear*" God. They don't have any respect, any honour for him. If you don't have any time for God, then there's no way you're going to take seriously what he has to say. Think again, for a moment, of the little boy with the toy. If he doesn't think you can fix it, he's not going to bring it to you. He'll keep on playing with a broken toy, losing out on the joy of having it complete and working properly. Or if you say you'll mend it and you don't, then he'll lose faith in you.

God has promised to bring salvation, to bring *shalom*. And there are no grounds for losing faith in him: he has kept his promises. Jesus did die. And he was brought back to life. God has kept his part of the deal. And I'm sure that if you asked around in here this morning you'd find all kinds of stories of how God has kept other promises, too, in the lives of his people. He offers us this vision of a kingdom of love and faithfulness and righteousness and peace. You can have a part in that. You can experience that in your own situation if you are prepared to turn to him and take him seriously. You can realise the promises of God in your life if you resolve not to return to your folly, the folly of thinking you know better than God.

As we look out on our world, we may well be tempted to despair. But God can work if we let him. In your own situation you may be crying out, "*Restore me again, O God.*" He will. He's promised he will. Why not let him, and allow your life to become a place where righteousness and *shalom* kiss one another?