

Sermon Christmas 2018

This very night one of the most loved aspects of this Christmas season celebrates its 200th anniversary. This night - Christmas eve 1818 - in a small Austrian town the carol Silent Night had its premiere. For 200 years this modest, simple little song has been part of perhaps all our Christmasses. The story of its origin is well known: the organ of the parish church damaged from flooding, so a tune by the local school master Franz Gruber and the text by the parish priest Father Josef Mohr put together so the church could have music for Christmas. From there it has worked its way into our hearts and lives so much so that in 2011 it was declared an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. At this time of year many of us are more nostalgic and sentimental than perhaps is good for us. But perhaps part of the appeal of the simple carol Silent Night is that is the atmosphere of calm, stillness that it exudes. *Sleep in heavenly peace*. In the deepest places of all our hearts, this is a vision of the Christ child we all hope to share in.

We hope for peace. But peace eludes us. In years to come we - and historians - might look back on 2018 as something of a turning point in modern history. There seems to be many pointers that 2018 was not at all 'business as usual'... Indeed, according to some commentators, this past year has seen a collapse in so many of the ideals and institutions we have spent the last 60 years and more trying to build and maintain. It has been a year when so many of the old certainties appear not so certain any more. In many countries democratic institutions are being unwound. The surprising rise of fascist and hard-line, right-wing movements across Europe and even here in Australia ought to leave us feeling more than a little nervous. And we can be left wondering, what on earth happened? How has this come to be? As we end this year and look to another we can be left feeling anxious and unsure about the future. For many, the future may look frightening. Under a cloud of darkness, we may be left looking for peace, hoping for peace, praying – even – for peace.

The echoes of peace found in the carol Silent Night of course are seen quite readily elsewhere at this time of year. Along with love and joy, wishes of peace feature in our Christmas cards and Christmas carols and even Christmas decorations. But because this word 'peace' is so familiar and is passed around so casually, we can overlook that *it is indeed* at the heart of what we celebrate at this holy time. From the very beginning Christians have asserted that Christ's birth is associated with peace.

The Gospel writer Luke - as he tells the story of Jesus' birth and childhood – sets the idea of peace as one of the central categories by which we might understand the person, work and ministry of Christ. References to peace occur three times in the story of Jesus' birth – before, during and after. It weaves around the story of Jesus' birth. But Luke doesn't just pluck this idea out of thin air. For him it's not just a nice, sentimental idea he decided he could apply to Jesus. No. When he attaches the idea of peace to the story of Jesus he does so in *reaction and response* to some other very powerful and very important claims *other* people were making about peace, namely the emperor and the Roman Empire.

Luke tells us the birth of Christ occurred in the reign of Augustus. The Gospel writers don't tell us anything by accident. So, in telling us Jesus is born during the reign of Augustus, Luke brings into his story many of the associations of that rule. Now, we might just shrug our shoulders and say, 'well that's interesting, Augustus was emperor, so what?' Except when we remember that one of the biggest claims Augustus made, and one of the central platforms of the Imperial propaganda machine during and after his reign, *was that the Emperor had won peace*. The famous *Pax Romana* had been hard fought and hard won and was to be maintained at all costs. To remind the Empire how important this was, Augustus inaugurated a new cult to the goddess Pax – peace. He built a shiny new temple on one of the main roads into Rome. He built a great big obelisk next to this temple so that *on his birthday* the shadow of this obelisk fell on the altar in that temple. Augustus was saying that *his* birth had brought peace *to heaven and earth*. So, when we are told in the gospel that after announcing the birth of the Messiah the angels then sing, *glory to God and on earth peace* we are being offered an *alternative* vision of where peace is found. It is *Christ's* birth that brings glory to God in heaven. It is *Christ's* birth which brings peace to earth – not the Emperor.

So, looking *back* to the birth of Jesus, we are told Jesus is born in the reign of Augustus and so puts that reign as part of the backdrop of Jesus's birth. But something else is happening when the Gospels come to be *written* some decades after the birth of Jesus. And this makes the Roman claims about peace even more pointed when held up against the peace Christ is claimed to bring. Just when the gospels were being written in the decade around 70AD the most traumatic experience occurred in the New Testament world: the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. This had been preceded by years of violent and bloody unrest.

When Rome finally crushed the Jewish rebellion, they compounded the trauma by having the Temple desecrated by pagan sacrifices and 100,000 prisoners being carried away. With the booty from the destruction of Jerusalem the Emperor Flavian built one of Rome's best-known monuments: The Colosseum. A triumphal arch – surviving to this day - depicts the defeat of the Jews and the treasures of the temple being carried away. And in celebration of the victory, and because every emperor after Augustus wanted to be like Augustus, a new public square was built called *the forum of Peace*. So, when Rome spoke of peace those first century Christians - including the Gospel writers - looked around them and saw the smouldering ruins of their beloved city and the end of life as they knew it. When Luke tells us about peace he knows how hollow the empire's claims really are. And instead points us to Christ.

Christmas is an invitation to consider Christ's claim to peace. We know in our own day the continued threat to peace in our world. It would be easy for us to feel a cloud is gathering over us. Indeed, a dark cloud for many *has* gathered. Meanwhile, there is no shortage of options to offers of peace: buy this, sign up to that, follow this person or that clever, new idea, align yourself with that political party or that self-help guru. We imagine that somehow *these* might be able to get us out of our mess. It's an argument as old as Augustus! How slow we are to learn... Despite all the optimism we invest in the human endeavour, despite all the positive thinking, despite the myth of progress and the supposed advantages of being modern, enlightened and rational, *peace eludes us!* We show ourselves singularly *unable* to realise it! Despite our advancements in knowledge and education, in medicine and technology, war, inequality and violence persist - *despite our best efforts*.

Despite *our* best efforts. Christmas reminds us that ultimate peace, ultimate victory, is not about *our* efforts. What we celebrate at Christmas is nothing *we* do, nothing *we* achieve. What we celebrate at Christmas is the pure gift of God in Jesus Christ who shows us the way to peace - true and lasting peace. And this peace comes by recognising who we are and giving ourselves ever more completely to the gift of God (as simple and as difficult as that is); coming to see what we were created to be: created in God's image, created to enjoy God's life forever. When we recognize that for ourselves, and when we recognize that in each other, and we recognize that within our enemy, then will come the peace no one can take away from us. May we all be given the Christmas grace to become God's agents of peace in the world. Amen.