

You know, each year when I sing the words to Silent Night Holy Night, I wonder to myself about the actual scene on that first Christmas. Was everything calm? Really? A woman heavily pregnant trying to find shelter in which to have a baby. To give birth in cattle shed? Really, was it calm? Fleeing from onlookers who know that Joseph and her are not married. Does she have peace? So, is it not a very easy time of the year to sentimentalise or romanticise Jesus? To make him sweet and cute. Is that where we get our peace from when we think of Christmas?

So, let's be real folks. The madness that I experience as I try to drive down to the Abbey Centre at this time of the year, reflects for me the madness of that first Christmas. A census has been called. Everyone has to return to their towns and villages from where their families are from. Bethlehem like everywhere else is heaving. Is that peace on earth? I don't think we find our peace from that scene. I would suggest that where we find our peace from comes from another Christmas carol – Hark the Herald angels sing, because through the new-born King, peace comes on earth as God and sinners are reconciled. That through this child, he lays his glory by born that we no more may die, born to raise each child of earth, born to give them second birth. That's where peace comes from if we unpack the Christmas story. Our experience of peace in a broken world doesn't come about by a sweet baby Jesus, but it comes through a risen King Jesus enthroned on high. Despite what is going around us in the world, or even more immediate in the craziness of Christmas, we must be rooted in the victory of Jesus on his throne. The peace we can have comes through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus now that he sits at the right hand of God on high. That folks is the Peace of Christmas.

Our text this morning from the Prophet Isaiah declares that a son will be given, a child will come, and on his shoulders rests all the governments of the world, and he will be called Wonderful Counsellor. That's my first point. You and I can truly feel the peace of Jesus because he gives to everyone who follows him wonderful counsel. To know that the creator of the universe hasn't left us to work out how to deal with everything in life, whether it's awkward stuff, worrying stuff or darn right massive stuff of this broken world – we are not abandoned, he gives us his wisdom. And if I was to ask some of you to come up now and tell us what Jesus has done in your lives, it would be incredible to hear how when you trusted in his counsel it ended up having a miraculous outcome. He gives good counsel in his word, in his presence, and in the history of the church.

You know in this place right now we have some well-educated people, we have people with experience in many different fields, and yet there are things in life that really just have no solution. I'd suggest the reason why in some cases things seem impossible in your life, is because you are seeking counsel from something or someone rather than Jesus. Our text today says that there is only one, wonderful counsellor, one who speaks into life and brings healing. That's where you and I will find peace for this life.

So, in our passage the prophet moves on to the title of Mighty God. And that's my second thought. Now in our sentimentalised image of the baby Jesus we won't like this description, because translated it means he is a mighty warrior; that he acts violently towards his enemies. When we look around us, we might wonder why the world is in the state it is. Well, there are dark spiritual forces working in this world and God not only hates them, but he plans to destroy them and gives us his victory in life as they try to battle against us, stealing us of our peace. Psalm 24:8 declares, "Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle". You see if we mistake the baby in the manger as this beautiful image without thinking of him as a Mighty God, then we lose all sight of what he came to do on the cross. He came to destroy the power of death that hangs over each of us. He came to defeat the devil and all his schemes that is so determined to drag you, me and all our family members as far away from God as possible into the eternal lake of fire. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:24 that "the end will come, when he [that's Jesus] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death". The message of the arrival of Jesus is that of his victory of sin and death, for you and me, handed to us through his resurrection. So where does our peace come from? How can I rest in a world that seems like there's a lot of chaos? Well, I have a wonderful counsel from the presence of God through Jesus. And I have a mighty warrior, therefore what should I be afraid of if Christ's victory is secure? That security brings a peace to my heart.

And so where does the prophet goes next? He calls him our Everlasting Father. Isaiah is saying that in the coming of Jesus, we have an everlasting eternal father, someone who is always there to run to. And that's where our peace comes from. I've told the story before about the things that children remember, and never forget when they grow up. When I was growing up as a child our home in Lisburn was at the gates of a massive park and bowling green. Literally I walked out my front door and the park was there. The park had a gate at either end, and it stretched for about 300m. The park was an ideal shortcut to get from one housing development to another. So if I was standing at my house I could see people coming through the gate at the other end making their way through. Anyway, my dad had promised me that he would take me to the King's Hall to see a Disney show that was on. I was so excited. He had told me that as soon as he would finish work he would come home to get me. So you can imagine me at the age of 8 waiting at the park gate, watching for my dad to come through the other gates. I waited and waited and waited with no sign of him. Hours went past, till eventually my mum told me that he wouldn't be coming home. My dad had stopped at the pub. He had an alcoholic addiction. He never came home to take me to the show. So my idea of an Everlasting Father throughout my early life was tainted by the image of a human father who was distant and constantly let me down. But this is not what the prophet is talking about here. He's talking about a Father who defends our cause. And that's where our

peace comes from. Peace comes because I have a place to go with my weariness, with my anger, with my questions. I have a Father that I can go to where I can bring my issues to him because he cares, and I have a Father who wars for my good in the unseen spiritual realms. That brings me real peace.

So, the last phrase is that he is the Prince of Peace. He is establishing peace. The peace of Christ's reign replaces the mayhem and dangers of spiritual oppression, it conquers sin once and for all, and it destroys the power of death. And the prophet shows the extent and limitlessness of Christ's peace by declaring that of his peace there will be no end to it. Now you could argue that if this is in fact the case, then why are we not seeing that peace today in our world? But I would argue that where we see people and church communities completely surrender to Christ as King, then peace is established and grows in more and more visible ways. Where people or church communities are half-hearted or loyal to other things then destruction occurs and there is a real absence of peace. When we give our all to Jesus, I believe we see an outpouring of peace in the midst of what might humanly be seen as chaos.

In a rather small but profound way I saw this on Friday in hospital. I was visiting a patient and as I entered into the unit I could hear this screaming of a woman. It was piercing. I looked at my list of who I had to visit, and it was her. She was screaming at the pain she was going through. She also couldn't speak properly and was very hard to make out. For a split second I thought to myself, I'm going to leave her, there's no point in going to her if she's so upset. But then something inside of me, let's call it the Holy Spirit's prompting challenged me to go to her. As I got near to her she started flinging her arms around. And so I took her hand and simply began to pray over her, praying for God's peace to surround her. Literally the moment I did this, she quietened and became incredibly calm. Some of the nurses were nearby and I was conscious that they could see what was happening. It was the peace of God surrounding this woman. I had surrendered myself entirely to Christ in that moment when he saw people he had compassion on them, that when he saw this storm, he brought calm. And as I surrendered myself to him, his peace was established in that hospital ward.

You see you cannot hedge your bets here. We are either for Jesus or we're not. We can't be half-hearted in our commitment. I'm partly loyal to you isn't submission to Christ. You might say, "Jonny thanks, but I have my own view on how the church should deal with sexuality, I have my own views when it comes to this aspect of society" that isn't coming under the authority of Christ. The peace of Christ reigns, rules and spreads where humanity gladly comes under his rule and walks in his counsel. Kings don't just throw out suggestions to their people – no, they reign, they command. And so we will only know true peace when we fully surrender to King Jesus.

And so, the prophet finishes by saying he will reign for ever and ever. If we look at the series of rulers throughout the history of the bible you will see that it alternates between

upright moral Godly leaders and then moves to one that is ungodly, violent and immoral. And there is this rhythm that bounces between the two. But the reign of Christ is not like that – the reign of Christ is forever. The coming of Christ was not like any other reign that people have seen up to this point. His reign is full of goodness, grace, beauty, justice, and mercy. That’s a beautiful promise. And this is how we truly find our peace in these times.

So, the final words of our passage today, Isaiah declares that “the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this”. That means God is all in for Jesus. That means that God is not passive about any of this. He’s eager to see all things become new through his son. This is where the Christian finds his or her peace.

And therefore, I am not abandoned. I am not suffocated by the brokenness of the world around me. God is for me and not against me. He will defend my every turn. He will judge in righteousness. He will reign forever. There is no greater power than his. And that folks is how we can have proper peace this Christmas; when we lift our eyes to these promises. Can I encourage you all to consider where in your life you need his reign and rule in your life – maybe you are one foot in the Kingdom of God but the other foot in somewhere else, or where you know your life is simply not working, where you have no peace because you’re ignoring his wonderful counsel in those choices you’re making. What if we this Christmas chose to move closer to the one who came to be with us - Immanuel. Can I invite us to pray.