Sermon in a Time of War (Ukraine)

'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.' The fourteenth verse of the second chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Luke. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It is with those words that Thomas à Becket begins his Christmas morning sermon in T S Eliot’s 1935 play Murder in the Cathedral, and I’ll come back to those words in a few minutes . . .

Following Helen Mitchell’s Intercessions a few Sunday’s ago in which she used some words attributed to the mythical, Lao Tzu, Mother Katy picked up on them in a sermon and they have, repeatedly and hauntingly come to mind, as War has broken out in Ukraine.

If there is to be peace in the world,
There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
There must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
There must be peace between neighbours.
If there is to be peace between neighbours,
There must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
There must be peace in the heart.
Like motherhood and apple pie, no one can challenge the sentiments of the words attributed to Lao Tzu; we all want peace, or at least any rational human worthy of being called ‘a human being’ wants peace, surely? After all, why would anyone not want peace?

But the world, is sadly, not only comprised of rational human beings: irrationality, hatred, anger, sin, a thirst for war and the relentless drive of greed and unbounded pride are hard-wired into our DNA, and its these things, when they break through our polite controlled public veneers, which wage war.

Jesus speaks of ‘peace’ again and again, indeed, there are at least give different understanding of peace in the New Testament:

- ‘peace’ as the absence of war or chaos;
- ‘peace’ as a right relationship with God;
- ‘peace’ as right relationship between people, and
- ‘peace’ as a greeting between people – much in the way we shall use the term in just a few minutes.

In the Old Testament, ‘peace’ or ‘shalom’ (which is used 250 times) is primarily about wholeness, health, well-being; that which happens when a whole people, an entire nation, is in harmony with God.

This Old Testament ‘peace’, whenever the word is used, is also pregnant with concepts of completion, fulfilment, maturity, soundness, although it can be quite hard to fathom out amidst the seemingly endless stories of war and who slew whom, where and when and why!

But read deeper and you will soon discover that the wars and the exiles and the famines which so blighted the long centuries of
Hebrew existence came about precisely because the people, the nation, were not in harmony with God; all was not whole, or healthy, the people were not living generous, faithful, mature lives.

Peace is not just the absence of war, it has to be worked at, nurtured, protected, and yes, sometime, even fought over to establish or restore. Peace doesn’t just happen; it can never, as we are discovering, yet again in Europe, just happen!

The New Testament speaks of peace 91 times and draws, not only on the Old Testament Hebrew concept of ‘shalom’ but on the Greek concept of ‘eirene’.

The Old Testament understandings of ‘peace’ as a people in harmony with its Creator becomes a more nuanced understanding of ‘peace’ as the product of graceful, measured conduct toward others; the proper exercise of commonly held understandings of how law and society and Go’s people might flourish even in the face of turmoil and persecution, modelling in ordinary lives, though God’s grace, the pattern of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, executed as the King of the Jews upon Calvary.

But back to Thomas à Becket and that Christmas sermon which is the very core of T S Eliot’s play,

“think for a while on the meaning of this word ‘peace’”, says Becket, “does it seem strange to you that the angels should have announced Peace, when ceaselessly the world has been stricken with War and the fear of War? Does it seem to you that the angelic voices were mistaken, and that the promise was a disappointment and a cheat?
Reflect now, how Our Lord Himself spoke of Peace. He said to His disciples 'My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.' Did He mean peace as we think of it: the kingdom of England at peace with its neighbours, the barons at peace with the King, the householder counting over his peaceful gains, the swept hearth, his best wine for a friend at the table, his wife singing to the children?

. . .His disciples knew no such things: they went forth to journey afar, to suffer by land and sea, to know torture, imprisonment, disappointment, to suffer death by martyrdom.

What then did He mean? If you ask that, remember then that He said also, 'Not as the world gives, give I unto you.' So then, He gave to His disciples peace, but not peace as the world gives.”

May almighty God, the God of Peace, look with compassion and mercy on the people of Ukraine, those trying to regain their peace and those who have been forced from their homes to flee across Europe, and may God have mercy on us, and on the people of every land and through his grace and our daily endeavour may there be:

peace in my heart;
peace in my home;
peace between me and my neighbours;
peace in my city;
peace in my nation;
and peace in God’s world.

Amen.