

The First Sunday of Advent  
November 26, 2010

**"IS PEACE POSSIBLE?"**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 2:1-5  
Matthew 24:36-44

A friend of mine told me about an exhibit called "The Art of Peacemaking: The Gun Sculpture," so I looked it up on the web. The centerpiece is an impressive sculpture by two Canadian artists, Sandra Bromley and Wallis Kendal, who gathered more than 7,000 weapons from around the world: sawed-off shotguns, machine and sub-machine guns, semi-automatic rifles, mortars, handguns, zip guns, flintlocks, anti-tank and anti-personnel mines and rockets. All were either military donations or crime seizures. After disabling the weapons, they welded them to form a massive five ton open cube with a doorway, designed to look like a prison cell or maybe, a tomb. Accompanying the sculpture, a photographic mural with victims' names and descriptions brings out the real human cost of violence. And a wall-sized blackboard encourages visitors to leave their own messages. To date, more than 500,000 comments have been recorded. The exhibit reminds visitors "that humanity has always been the first, and most important, victim of war." According to the artists, the aim is "to promote peace and end world violence" by showing how "violence can be contained through an act of human will."

Well, it's a beautiful thought anyway. It reminds me of Isaiah's lovely oracle we heard again today:

*they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4).*

In the eighth century before the Christian era, Isaiah spoke longingly of a lasting peace and a permanent freedom from the devastation of war upon his land. He communicated in beautiful poetic imagery a universal longing and a universal frustration which has lasted from his day to our own. We all want peace. We have all had war.

The world hasn't really changed much since Isaiah's time. He spoke from a specific moment in history, when the nations surrounding Judah and the people around Jerusalem had been ravaged by the invading Assyrian armies. But war has continued to plague humanity ever since. President Dwight Eisenhower, who knew as much as anyone about waging war, observed in 1953:

*Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.*

We still long for the world to be free of war, but we rightly extend Isaiah's vision to every level of life where hostility robs our peace. Children can't get along with parents, spouses war with

one another, and even Christians divide in verbal violence against one another. Some may speak of primitive savages and look down on third world nations where every citizen carries a machine gun. But we have over 200 million guns in this country and we use them on each other. Since the year 2004, more people die annually in the United States from gunshot wounds than from automobile accidents. According to Andrew Cuomo:

*This is a uniquely American issue. No other industrialized country loses as many children as we lose to gun violence. As a matter of fact, the 25 other industrialized nations combined, if you add up all of their loss of children, our number is 12 times the combined number. So this is not just a part of the evolution of the globe. Something different is going on in this country.*

*We lose 14 people out of every 100,000, annually - 14 people. England loses 4, Australia 2, Germany 1, Japan .05. So this (gun) violence and this (gun) death is an American phenomenon.*

In truth we are one of the most violent nations in the history of the planet. In our media we glorify violence as a way of resolving conflict. At the same time we long for safety. We long for harmony. We long for peace.

But is peace possible? I mean, really? In this world where evil thrives and all of us have some measure of enmity towards somebody, can we create peace? We can imagine the end of all hostilities. We can dream of a world where no child loses her parents to bombs and bullets, where no nation sacrifices a generation of its sons to war, where every person can feel safe in his or her own home. We can conceive of a day when every country takes the resources now applied to national defense and invests them instead in agriculture, education, and health. We could end hunger. We could cure most diseases. We could take care of all the children in the world. We can imagine peace, but can we do it? Is peace possible?

Yes, some say, but only if we are in charge. Well, that's not peace. That's dominance, like the so-called Pax Romana or "Roman Peace" which lasted as long as the Roman legions could enforce it and keep all the other nations under their thumb and paying tribute to Rome. As Tacitus observed, "*They make a desert and call it peace!*" (Agricola, 30). There can be no peace without freedom and justice and equality for all. There can be no peace if one nation uses 80% of the world's resources to make its people rich by keeping others poor. There can be no peace without a global vision. So is peace possible?

Yes, some say, but only when God makes it happen at the end of time. We will have peace someday in heaven, pie in the sky when we die, but in the meantime, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!" This is the view of the prophet Joel, who turned Isaiah's words around. He told the people of his day:

*Proclaim this among the nations:  
Prepare war,  
stir up the warriors.  
Let all the soldiers draw near,  
let them come up.  
Beat your plowshares into swords,*

*and your pruning hooks into spears;  
let the weakling say, "I am a warrior." (Joel 3:9-10).*

He told his people to get ready for war against all their enemies because God was about to judge the nations who had oppressed them and would guarantee their victory in battle. He wasn't talking about the United States! For Joel, Israel is the good guy and everybody else is the bad guy. Peace will come when God turns all their enemies into dust. But Jesus came later with a vision of love suggesting that peace will come when we turn all our enemies into friends. Is this peace possible?

Yes, says Isaiah, but only when God brings it. Yet Isaiah seems to believe God will do it within history.

*In days to come (he says)  
the mountain of the Lord's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.  
Many peoples shall come and say,  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;*

Isaiah was a priest of the Temple in Jerusalem. Like every preacher, he thought the whole world could live in peace if they would just come to his church! But the picture he gives is a peace that comes from a universal submission to the rule of God. Well of course, that's not going to happen if you think of it as everybody joining the same religion. But it can happen if God - not religion - rules.

God wants peace more than we do. And how will God create this peace? Isaiah ends his vision with a call:

*O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the Lord! (Isaiah 2:5).*

It is an early version of our benediction song, "*Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.*" We can be a people of peace. We can set aside violence in our ways and doings. We can find and nurture the inner peace Christ offers through faith. We can pray for peace. We can work hard to create peace in our homes and offices and communities, break down the barriers of race and religion which divide us. We can join realistic movements that do the hard work of waging peace in the world, of questioning every act of violence in the name of the state to ask is it right, is it just, is it necessary, will it solve the problem or make it worse, will it lead to peace? Waging peace is harder than waging war, but the results of war are so much harder than peace. It takes

sacrifice and patience and the willingness to stand against those who are eager for violence, who profit from it. But that's what it means "to walk in the light of the Lord."

Is peace possible? Cynicism tells me no, not in the real world, not within human history. War is necessary. War serves legitimate purposes, some of which are beyond the stated purposes of the warring people. As long as nations exist, they will work for their own self-interest, and that will always eventually lead to war.

Is peace possible? I don't know, but I think we Christians, of all people, are supposed to try. Isaiah seems to think God will bring peace through God's people. The name which we claim, the name of Christ, represents one who responded to the violence of the cross with forgiveness, who told us to love our enemies and turn the other cheek, who gave his body and blood to help us make peace with God. He is called "The Prince of Peace." Surely we, followers of this Jesus, must practice peace and work for peace all our days, in all our ways. Then the call I would make to you today, on this first Sunday of a new year in Christian worship, on this first Sunday of Advent when we announce the coming of light into the darkness of our world, on this Sunday of hope ... when we consider God's own longing for and promise of peace ... the call I would make to you today is this:

*O house of Jacob,  
O people of Jesus,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the Lord!*

Amen. May we pray?

God, grant us peace. Whatever bitterness we hold towards another human being, let us give that up into your hands now. Whatever enmity poisons our hearts, let us release into the cross of Christ. Whatever guilt clouds our judgment, whatever grief grips our souls, whatever past corrupts the present, help us be freed from it by your forgiveness. Let the peace that passes understanding well up from within our souls and spread within our families and associations and communities until through us you touch the world with peace, in the name of Christ. Amen.