

# Peace Today

By John Taylor



PEACE

**'We respect and recognize other people and those who are strange to us when we stop trying to make them like ourselves...' Jurgen Moltmann**

## **What Is Peace?**

For over 40 years the superpowers the United States and the Soviet Union did actually engage in armed conflict with each other. For those of us old enough to remember it the Cold War in hindsight appears as a very strange time. There really were two different worlds which had very limited contact with each other, which saw each other as competitors and foes, and which tended to hate and dehumanise the people of the other world. The superpowers competed for control of what was described as 'the third world'. Each of them continued to materially support their client states and insurgent groups in conflicts in different parts of the world. They did not fight each other because of their huge nuclear arsenals threatened mutually assured destruction if they did. They were not at peace. Peace does not come from avoiding conflicts and differences but from resolving them.

Our church seal has the simple motto, 'Peace'. Typically for Community of Christ, the design for the church seal was developed by a committee (Joseph Smith III, Jason W Briggs and Elijah Banta) in 1874. Atypically for Community of Christ committees they were appointed in the morning and produced their design on the afternoon of the same day. The imagery of the seal was intended to reflect the prophetic vision of Zion in Isaiah 11.6 a future world where, while differences are retained, harmony is achieved. Peace comes when we acknowledge and even honour our differences and yet live in harmony.

## **Being At Peace Is Harder Than Being At War**

I first heard this said when I watched to a TV broadcast of a National Press Club address by Gerry Adams (then leader of Sein Fein in Ireland). It was a speech that impressed me at the time.

After I wrote a first draft of this article, Russia invaded Ukraine. How can I, who has never been in a war, blithely say that being at peace is harder than being at war. War, of course, is hell. As I write this, images are televised of yet more destruction and atrocities from the war in Ukraine. Being at peace must be easier, must it not? I suspect, as with many things, the answer to that question depends on the

circumstances. In this instance I think the most relevant circumstance is: how you view the other who you are trying to be at peace or at war with.

In war you just have to hate people who are different from you. If you are a leader you just have to order the military to fight. Most leaders don't fight anymore. For example, the last English king to die in battle was Richard III. Hating people who are different from you doesn't have to be rational. Hate usually is based on myths and stereotypes and involves dehumanizing the enemy. The differences between you don't have to be very significant for you to be at war. Mighty contests do rise from trivial things as Alexander Pope recognised. Pope's contemporary and satirical colleague, Jonathan Swift, satirised conflict in the account in Gulliver's Travels of the raging dispute in Lilliput over whether to crack the big or the small end of an egg.

Being at peace with people is much more difficult. You have to live with people who are different from you. You have to accept the ways in which they are different from you. They might like different food. They might have different tastes in music, or clothes, or furniture or art. They might speak a different language or even if they speak your language they might speak it differently. They, or people like them, might have done something really hurtful to you or your family in the past.

You have to try really hard to live, or at least spend significant time with, people who are different from you. Yet, many of us actually do it all the time, in families, at school and workplaces. In situations where we have a common connection with others we tend to focus on aspects that are relevant to that connection and 'get on' with what we have to do in a family, at school or in a workplace. If all value the common element sufficiently the differences between people are, at least, tolerated if not enjoyed. In these situations, after all, there can be people we like having around and those that we only ever tolerate (Jurgen Moltmann, The Open Church). Only a deeper sense of commonality can induce community where differences are appreciated rather than merely suppressed for the sake of the common purpose.

**The Christian proclamation is a proclamation of peace – peace is fundamental to the Christian proclamation**

My father was a great amateur fisherman. One of his great disappointments in life was that I was not. I was happy enough when the fish were biting but did not really have the patience to stay there waiting for them to bite. My father had his own boat and would go fishing in Sydney Harbour or ‘outside’ in the open ocean twice a week. The last time I went fishing with him we anchored on a reef near Nielsen Park in Sydney Harbour. After we had been fishing for a short time he had a bite on his line and said, ‘this is a flathead, better get the net’. I’m sure he said that just to give me something to do to make me feel useful. The boat had a landing net with a wooden handle with a metal frame around the net itself screwed on to pieces of metal down each side of the handle. My father never looked after his fishing gear very well and there was fish grease and scales all along the handle. As I went to put the net near the head of the fish the handle slipped out of my hands and, to my surprise the net and handle started to sink. The water there is really clear and deep and I could see the net slowly, slowly sinking. My father just pulled the flathead into the boat and didn’t say anything. He clearly wasn’t happy though. We kept fishing but were not talking. Then I had a tremendous bite on my line. My father grabbed my line, as he had done ever since I was a child, and said, ‘that’s a big kingie (Kingfish)’ and then proceeded to tell me how to bring the fish in. Once the fish came near the surface it was clear that it was a big fish. Of course, by this stage, we no longer had a net. This, of course, didn’t faze my father who gaffed the fish in the gills as I lifted it into the boat. I still don’t think we talked much but he was clearly really happy and I felt forgiven. It was the biggest fish I ever caught.

The story is probably too long and too personal but I think some useful points can be made from it. Doesn’t much hatred and other anti-social behaviour stem from our feelings of personal inadequacy. Haven’t we all let the net slip through our hands at times. Our personal anxieties can lead us to fear the other and to narcissistically surround ourselves only with those who are like us. We become slaves of caricatures and stereotypes of what we perceive our peers expect from us. Doesn’t awareness of being forgiven bring a profound, almost cathartic, sense of joy.

The Christian proclamation to us is that, notwithstanding all our failings, we are forgiven and loved infinitely. We are daughters and sons of a loving God who was one with the poor and oppressed, suffered and died and yet lives. We are enabled to discover our true selves and to celebrate, rather than merely tolerate, differences in others. We discover our common humanity as children of God. In the words of Jurgen Moltmann (God For A Secular Society 1997):

‘We respect and recognize other people and those who are strange to us when we stop trying to make them like ourselves, but attempt to open ourselves for their particular character and transform ourselves, together with them, into a new community of people who are different from one another. Then the form which social justice takes becomes acceptance of others. Of course this presupposes that in our relation to God we know that we are accepted by him (sic) and as those who are different from him (sic), and that as those alien to him (sic) we are justified.’

**Peace Has To Begin With You And Me**

**If:**

- I try to live with or alongside you
- I accept and honour you even though you are different from me
- I recognise that we are both human and of infinite worth
  - I see myself in you

**Then:**

- How could I hate you?
  - How could I fight you?
  - How could I think of you as less than human?
    - How could I not seek economic and social justice for you?
  - How could I not expect the same from you?
    - If I saw myself in you and you saw yourself in me and we both saw the face of God.
- We could not be at war. We would have peace.



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5. It is imperative to understand that when you are truly baptized into Christ you become part of a new creation. By taking on the life and mind of Christ, you increasingly view yourselves and others from a changed perspective. Former ways of defining people by economic status, social class, sex, gender, or ethnicity no longer are primary. Through the gospel of Christ a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity, and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God.

6a. As revealed in Christ, God, the Creator of all, ultimately is concerned about behaviors and relationships that uphold the worth and giftedness of all people and that protect the most vulnerable. Such relationships are to be rooted in the principles of Christ-like love, mutual respect, responsibility, justice, covenant, and faithfulness, against which there is no law.

6b. If the church more fully will understand and consistently apply these principles, questions arising about responsible human sexuality, gender identities, roles, and relationships; marriage; and other issues may be resolved according to God's divine purposes. Be assured, nothing within these principles condones selfish, irresponsible, promiscuous, degrading, or abusive relationships.

