

MATTHEW 5:9
"THOSE WHO MAKE PEACE"

Conflict: where do you start? There have been all kinds of reminders this week of wars: in Afghanistan, for example, as the troops come home and we are reminded of the cost of conflict in human lives. In the Middle East there are all kinds of entrenched hatreds that break out into open conflict: Israel and Palestine; Islamic State in Northern Iraq, or Syria and other Muslim factions that just don't get on. Conflict breaks out, and lives are lost! If I was preaching this sermon at any other time in history, there would be another list of conflicts and wars! Rivalry: we've seen that in the referendum and the antagonism that has been caused by that political debate, worse than anything I've ever seen in Scottish politics before; it became personal, as family and friends fell out; there are other kinds of rivalry, for a job and that can cause huge amounts of ill-feeling in an office; there are sporting rivalries. Family conflict is perhaps much more open and visible than it was in past; it was probably always there, but hidden; now it is out in open much more and family conflict is a huge issue, with violence and abuse. Churches have their conflicts and that is an issue that almost needs no description; Edinburgh Presbytery this week will debate the issue of same-sex relationship in ministry, the issue that has divided churches and families, and has broken friendships.

This is the real world in which we live; Christians are not immune from this real world, and the same conflicts that affect world, affect us at times. Christian families face the same tensions as other families; Christians at work face the same rivalries as other people; Christian politicians are not immune; churches face conflicts too. There are people who are "storm-centres of trouble and strife", who seem to attract conflict wherever they go; groups, churches, society, all have people who are trouble-makers, who cause other people to fall out, who cause division over the most trivial issue; who can cause trouble without even seeming to try! For some, conflict is even seen as a good thing, as a way to make progress, on the "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs" theory and they will look to achieve their ambition regardless of how many casualties they leave behind and how much conflict they have aroused on the way! It is the way of the world!

Jesus has a different view of the world. "*Blessed are...*" (*Matthew 5:9*) The Beatitudes offer a view of the world that is different: here are eight qualities and values that are to be embraced by the disciple. These are eight qualities and values of the one group of people, not eight different groups. There is a quality and a value to be embraced and a promised blessing will follow; the whole blessing of God is poured out on the disciple who aspires to put these values and qualities into practice. This is a very different view of life from the view of the world in which we live; this is Jesus' way, Jesus' counter-culture. Not only did Jesus teach these qualities and values, but He lived by them; He embodied them perfectly; our task is to learn to be like Him.

"*Blessed are...*" (*Matthew 5:9*) It is easy to paint a picture of a world full of conflict, but the Christian is to be a peace-maker and we'll describe in moment or two how that can happen. In order to be a peace-maker, the Christian has first to be a peace lover, to be someone who lives at peace with others as much as possible, someone who never seeks out conflict or to be responsible for it, someone whose great desire is for people to live in peace and harmony together, to be "people in whose presence bitterness cannot live." In this, we are called "*sons of God*" - being called sons of God is the greatest privilege of the gospel, and it is ours in Christ. Here, Jesus is suggesting that there should be a family-likeness, the Christian reflecting our Father, loving what our Father loves, trying to be like Him. "*His purpose...*" (*Ephesians*

2:15b) God's plan and purpose is to reconcile people to Himself by His grace in the gospel and in reconciling us to Himself, we are reconciled to one another in this "one new person". The gospel is the place where all old divisions and conflicts are gone and we are one in Christ. As God has "made peace" so we are to be "peace-makers".

Peace-making level 1: peace between us and our God. Here we see the power of the word "no!" in creating conflict. This is the story of Eden and Adam and Eve are given the garden in which to live and to walk with God in the cool of the evening, a picture of perfect peace and harmony. "Don't eat!" said God of the tree, but Eve and Adam said "no, we will eat" and they did eat and were thrown out of the garden and peace and harmony was shattered, the relationship is broken and only when Jesus came, and died and was raised did peace come back to that relationship. Paul describes his ministry and the ministry of the Church in the world after Jesus: *"If anyone..." (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)* God has reconciled us to Himself in Jesus; Jesus has taken away our sin and we have peace with God; we are reconciled; God has done this! Our task is to tell other people this good news and in telling other people this good news, and as they believe this good news, a reconciliation takes place; someone else is reconciled to God and finds peace.

This is a fantastic peace-making partnership which is at work in the world and in which we have a part to play. We tell people about Jesus and what Jesus has done and God goes to work to create a sense of peace in that person's heart. There is no greater piece of work in which we can be involved than playing our part in helping someone else find peace with God, find forgiveness and grace. We tell people the stories of Jesus; we say something about our faith; we share something important; and that can have a life-changing impact on someone else. The Spirit takes our faltering words and uses them to persuade someone of God's grace in the gospel and someone else is reconciled to God. This is "Peace-making level 1!"

Peace-making level 2: how did Jesus react when His disciples argued? Luke doesn't tell us too much about how Jesus felt, but perhaps we hear a sharpness in His words as He sets about healing the division and the argument. *"Also a..." (Luke 22:24)* Rivalry, even amongst the disciples! Who is the greatest? Who is the number one disciple? Who is the most important member of the group? They seemed to be arguing about this just after sharing the Passover together; how easily sin gets a grip of our hearts; one of the most significant events in their journey with Jesus and this is how it ends, in a dispute and in a rebuke. Jesus brings their dispute to an end. He makes peace; He reconciles them to one another. The most obvious early impact of the gospel was to make sworn enemies into brothers and sisters in Christ; the old divisions between Jew and Gentile are reconciled and both find their place, equally, in the family of God; divisions between men and women, slaves and free, are also taken away so that, for example, Philemon, the master, greets Onesimus his runaway slave as his Christian brother.

This can be a painful business. John Stott lists some of the pains of peace-making level 2: there is the pain of apologising to someone we've hurt, necessary before peace can be made. Or the pain of rebuking someone, the pain of refusing to forgive until someone repents. Or the pain of listening to someone, of ridding ourselves of prejudice, or trying to understand sympathetically both points of view in order to bring people back together again. We can paper over the cracks, but real reconciliation will deal with issues and while that might be painful for a time, it will enable people to live in peace and harmony. The Victorian evangelist DL Moody was conducting a meeting somewhere and sensed a real hardness in his audience on this particular occasion; he wasn't sure what to do about it, but found that he just couldn't preach; he explained that the congregation would sing a hymn and then he would see what they

could do. As the congregation was singing, a person got up from one side of the hall, crossed the room and shook another by the hand and they hugged. Moody said that the atmosphere changed from that very moment! Peace-making level 2!

Peace-making level 3: be lovers of peace. This is all about the kind of people we are, "people in whose presence bitterness cannot live" (Barclay) Isn't that a fantastic description of the kind of people we might be, we should be; people in whose presence bitterness cannot live? We talked earlier about people who are trouble-makers, storm centres, who attract conflict. We are to be the exact opposite! When Jesus was sorting the conflict between His disciples, his remedy was all about the kind of people they were to be: "*the greatest...*" (Luke 22:26b) Was there a conversation in which the disciples were making claims to the top spot? Were they people who wanted to be first? But Jesus shows them how to be people with the right kind of values. We are to be people whose attitude is changed from the self-centred and ambitious to being a servant of others, concerned to serve others rather than be served. Jesus came to serve. Time and time again with these big issues, these questions of values and qualities, we come back to the kind of people we are. We said when we asked "What kind of Scotland...?" do we want to have, that the answer was so often to be found in "what kind of people do we want to be?"

Is this true of every conflict? Why do wars happen? Someone wants to rule the world and will go to any lengths; war is fuelled by that selfish desire for power! Nations are forced to go to war against each other because of the human heart's desire to be first, to be ambitious. Conflicts in Churches are no different: someone has an agenda, a desire to control the congregation and do this in their way, and that ambition fuels conflict in church and so often results in a church divided. We are to be peaceable people, not quarrelsome or selfishly ambitious; we are to do all that we can to make and keep peace in the community and in the church; we are to learn to spread peace wherever we are by being selfless, loving, approachable people. We can only make peace when we love peace. Are we the people in whose presence bitterness and conflict cannot live? Peace-making level 3

"*Blessed are...*" (Matthew 5:9) Level 1: tell someone the gospel stories of Jesus, and God is at work reconciling someone new to Himself, to be at peace with God. Level 2: having fallen out with someone, be reconciled, and live at peace together; it can be painful - repentance, listening, forgiving – all of it far from easy. Level 3: loving peace, being the kind of people who promote peace by our very being, learning to love and serve, learning to curb our ambitions, learning to value peace and reconciliation. God loves peace: God has all 3 levels of peace in His heart; we should learn to be like Him, children reflecting the ways of the Father. If this were easy we'd have mastered it by now; it is hard to live at peace with all people, but to this we are called. "The followers of Jesus have been called to peace... He is their peace... now they are told that they must not only *have* peace, but *make* it." (Bonhoeffer) It is a great calling, and a huge challenge; what a difference to the community, the church, society when we learn to be peace-makers!