“Peace built by drawing close to woundedness”
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In 2018, I had the opportunity to visit North Korea, and our guides took us to a hill overlooking the Taedong River and the city itself. Across the river, I could see the 1970s- and 1980s-style buildings that marked Pyongyang’s skyline, alongside newer, even taller skyscrapers. As we gazed at the city, I asked the guide where the old city was. The guide did not understand the question. So I repeated myself, slower this time, hoping to get an answer. But my question was still not understood. Then someone explained: there was no old city.

I had simply assumed an old city would be there. But during the Korean War, Pyongyang, like much of the northern part of this peninsula, had been completely devastated by bombing. Not a brick was left upon brick. General Emmett O’Donnell, who commanded US bombing operations, later testified before Congress that there were “no more targets in Korea.” By the later stages of the war, US planners were struggling to identify significant targets that had not already been struck. Over the course of the Korean War, approximately 635,000 tons of bombs and 32,000 tons of napalm were dropped on Korea. There was no old city.

“For he himself is our peace, who has made both groups one and broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

What an apt text with which to bring this Ecumenical Peace Convocation to an end. A text that speaks to the heart of what has been experienced on this peninsula for more than seventy years. A war that began in 1950, yet whose roots stretch back to the division of 1945 and the long history of colonialism and competing imperial ambitions on this peninsula. A war that cost an estimated two to three million lives. And a war that, technically, has never ended. There has been no peace treaty. Only an armistice.

An armistice that has given us the Demilitarized Zone, perhaps one of history’s bitterest ironies, because, as we have seen, it is one of the most heavily fortified and mined strips of land in the world, watched over by hundreds of thousands of troops on both sides. One people divided. Families divided. A land divided. Korea knows what empire does, because this peninsula has repeatedly been made the object of the ambitions of greater powers. Empire divides lands and peoples. Empire draws lines on maps. Empire decides who dies and who lives, who gets to live in security and whose lives are made precarious.

And in the midst of an unending war, in which military and even nuclear threats have become an everyday fear, we hear these extraordinary words from Ephesians: “He himself is our peace.” Ephesians is traditionally understood as one of the prison epistles, with Paul writing from Roman captivity, another empire determining where bodies may go and where they may not. Ephesians is concerned with what God has done in Christ and the kind of community that action creates. At its centre stands a wall.

Ephesians chapter 2 begins with humanity’s condition apart from Christ and with God’s initiative in making us alive by grace through faith. But the argument then becomes concrete,

turning to the hostility between Jews and Gentiles. Into this division, the author makes this astonishing claim: Christ is our peace.

Many interpreters hear in the language of the “dividing wall” an echo of the actual barrier in the Jerusalem Temple that separated the areas accessible to Gentiles from the inner courts, a boundary which Gentiles could not cross on pain of death. Whether or not this particular wall is directly in the author’s mind, the image is striking because hostility is never merely an idea. We build our hostility. We give it architecture. We draw borders. We erect fences. We build walls. We lock doors. We create spaces in which some belong, and others do not. And the claim of Ephesians is that Christ breaks down the dividing wall of hostility.

But something more happens. In Christ, not only does a wall come down, but something new is created. Verse 15 tells us that Christ creates “one new humanity” in place of the two. The imagery then shifts again to that of a building. The new community becomes the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the cornerstone.

But notice what reconciliation does not mean. Christ does not destroy difference. A Jew does not cease to be a Jew, nor a Gentile a Gentile. The wall comes down, but the people do not disappear. Reconciliation is not the erasure of difference. It is the end of hostility.

And this speaks to us here and now, in the very context of precarity and insecurity in which we live, to the reality of a war that has not ended and a people divided. It tells us that division need not have the final word. There is the possibility of something new. Those who have been separated can become neighbours again. Those who have been divided can inhabit a common household. Those who have learned to fear one another can learn another way of living.

The good news of Christ, however, is not merely something we announce. It is something we are called to embody. This is what the NCCK and so many people of good will have relentlessly sought to do by working for peace on this peninsula. So what might this look like? Let us turn to the life of Jesus himself.

In Luke 19, Jesus approaches Jerusalem, looks upon the city, and weeps. “If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” This is not a polite tear. The word conveys deep lament. Jesus grieves over a catastrophe he sees unfolding. There is a terrible irony here. Jerusalem, the city whose very name evokes peace, does not know the things that make for peace.

Perhaps peacemaking begins with lament. We live in a world that is unravelling, epitomised here by the continuing threat of war on this peninsula, but also by wars and occupations across our world, by an economic system that wreaks havoc on the lives of so many, and by a climate catastrophe whose greatest burdens are borne by those who have contributed to it least. The tears of Jesus call us out of our Christian triumphalism. They call us out of the misguided messianic hope that everything will simply be well. Sometimes faithfulness means sitting uncomfortably with what has been broken. Sometimes faithfulness means weeping. Lamenting what we have lost. Lamenting what has been taken from others. Lamenting also the ways in which we ourselves have contributed to the world’s suffering.

But Jesus does not only lament. He speaks of "the things that make for peace." The Greek expression is *ta pros tēn eirēnēn*, literally "the things towards peace." I find that extraordinarily beautiful. The things towards peace. Peace is not simply some event on the horizon that will magically appear if we hope, pray, or lament enough. Peace has things that lead towards it: practices, choices, relationships, postures, acts of courage, acts of forgiveness, acts of justice. Things towards peace.

And so perhaps this is one of the questions that must remain with us as we leave this Convocation: what are the things that make for peace? What are the things that make for peace on the Korean peninsula? What are the things that make for peace in Gaza? What are the things that make for peace in Iran? What are the things that make for peace in our churches? What are the things that make for peace when nations are preparing for war?

These are not questions with easy answers. But perhaps that is precisely why Jesus speaks not simply of peace, but of "the things that make for peace." Peace comes through the deliberate, active, and everyday practice of peace in our communities and institutions. It means continually scrutinising our relationships and structures to ask whether they are just, whether they are healing division, and whether they are bringing us closer to one another or building yet another wall.

And then there is another scene. In John chapter 20, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples in a locked room. They have locked themselves away because they are afraid. This is significant. In the resurrection narratives, Jesus does not go to Pilate. He does not go to Caiaphas. He does not appear before the soldiers who crucified him. He does not return to the crowd who called for his death. The resurrection is not vindication by spectacle. Jesus does not return from the dead to terrify those who killed him. He goes instead to the marginalised, the grieving and the afraid: to the women who come to the tomb, to disciples walking away from Jerusalem, to frightened friends behind locked doors.

And here again we encounter a wall. Only this time it is a wall built by fear. The risen Christ crosses it. He enters the locked room and says, "Peace be with you." Making peace cannot be the politics of vengeance. Jesus does not strike fear into the hearts of those who killed him. He offers peace to those already afraid. And this peace is not empty comfort. In John's account, "Peace be with you" is followed by the giving of the Spirit and the commission concerning forgiveness. The peace Christ gives does not reproduce vengeance. It creates the possibility of another future.

And then, a week later, there is Thomas. Thomas refuses to believe unless he sees the wounds. When Jesus comes again, he does something extraordinary. He does not hide his wounds. He shows them. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." The risen Christ can pass through walls, yet he still bears wounds.

Perhaps there is something here we urgently need to understand about peace. Peace does not require us to pretend the wounds never happened. Reconciliation is not amnesia. The risen body of Christ still bears the marks of violence, and Jesus invites Thomas to come close to them. If we are to work for peace, perhaps this too is what we must do: draw close to woundedness. Draw close to those whose cities have been destroyed, to those whose families

have been divided, to those who live behind borders and walls, to those whose bodies bear the consequences of decisions made by powerful people far away. Draw close to the crucified, because peace cannot be made at a safe distance from suffering.

And so we return to where we began: to a city where I went in search of an old city and found it had been bombed away, to a peninsula that still bears the wounds of war, to a people divided by one of the most heavily fortified borders on earth. Into this wounded landscape comes the astonishing proclamation of Ephesians: “He himself is our peace.”

Christ breaks down the wall. Christ enters the locked room. Christ shows us the wound. The wall does not have the final word. Fear does not have the final word. Even the wound does not have the final word. Yet the wound is not erased. And so we lament. We seek the things that make for peace. We refuse the politics of vengeance. And we draw close to the wounded. Violence creates separation, but Christ crosses the boundary.

And perhaps this is what it means for us to confess, here on this divided peninsula, that Christ is our peace: to believe that no wall is eternal, that hostility need not determine our future, that difference need not become division, that wounds can be remembered without becoming weapons, and to begin, here and now, to practise the things that lead to peace.

“For he himself is our peace, who has made both groups one and broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

Amen.