

The True Meaning of Christmas

SLIDE 1 – Path of Peace

December 10th is [Human Rights Day](#) and it is observed annually. It commemorates the anniversary of one of the world's most groundbreaking global pledges: the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR). This landmark document enshrines the inalienable rights that everyone is entitled to as a human being - regardless of race, colour, religion, sex, language, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

A few months ago when I was do my weekly visit to Meadowburn Primary, their school assembly was focussed around Human rights and it seems to be part of their curriculum because the head teacher referred to their learning in their classrooms.

The Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 and set out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected.

It is available in 577 languages, from Abkhaz to Zulu, making the UDHR the [most translated document](#) in the world.

Human rights can empower individuals and communities to forge a better tomorrow. By embracing and trusting the full power of human rights as the path to the world we want, the goal is that we can become more peaceful, equal and sustainable.

What has this to do with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, you may well wonder and our gospel reading today.

I think that it is directly linked – his father Zechariah said that John's birth was to welcome in a new age – God was about to redeem his people and bring salvation - he said that his son was a prophet of the most high, he was to prepare the way for the one who was like the rising sun coming from heaven to shine from heaven. The elderly Zechariah is speaking of the light of the world, who will shine upon those living in darkness, and in the shadow of death, and who will guide our feet into the paths of peace.

This is exactly the goal of the UDHR to create peaceful, just and inclusive societies. To lead us and guide us on the path of peace, and I would expect

that this is also the goal of Daisy Chain in Govanhill, a community with over 50 ethnic groups, all living in a small community, and in the midst of this is this amazing Christian charity, shining the light of Jesus, and reaching out to provide its residents a pathway of peace; of course peace to the Jew meant more than the absence of conflict, peace meant healing in the deepest sense – it meant salvation, wholeness and this echoes the words of Zechariah, that God has raised up salvation, a new thing was happening, and we can say is still happening God's salvation, God's peace is demonstrated in Govanhill amongst some of our most challenged children. **Watch video from Daisy Chain**

Slide 2

The Mind of Peace

Luke 1 v67-89

In the temple, 8 days old, this little baby John was presented to God, and it is here that Zechariah speaks, the first time in at least 9 months.

9 months earlier he was in the temple and the angel Gabriel came to him and told him that he would have a son and John was in his older years as was his wife Elizabeth and John was struck dumb.

But now, the son is born and John we are told is filled with the Holy Spirit, and 9 months of pent-up feelings; 9 months of reflection about his newborn baby came rolling off his tongue and that is our reading today.

John is to be the forerunner of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will be called a prophet of the highest.

John who was given the nickname John the Baptist because of his calling, and that he called people to repent and be baptised.

We often have images of John as being some sort of wild man in the desert shouting and ranting and demanding repentance, and he may have been a bit like that but John was actually someone who was God's agent to bring peace into the hearts and lives of those people and so prepare the way for Jesus.

John wasn't a mentally deranged person but he was someone in his right mind. John had a large following and they were coming in their thousands to hear him in the desert, they were seeking the way of true peace.

John was offering them a new beginning, the opportunity to turn from their past and enter the new age that was about to come.

John's preaching was transformational, those who came to hear him were told to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, in other words, let your faith be real, and be people of integrity.

The crowd responded, "then what shall we do", and John's response is practical, as he encourages them; basically be people with generous hearts, give to those in need. If you have two shirts, give to the person who has none, one of them; and do the same with food – share and care, he said, and to the tax collectors, who came to hear him he said, Don't take any more than you should, be fair with people and to the soldiers, don't extort money – no corruption, be honest with people, and be content with your pay.

John is calling for a just society, a society where people live in equality and basically human rights, this takes us to the Declaration of Human Rights and it begins with repentance and baptism.

He calls for a community, where there are no poor – yes, it is a religious calling, but it is also a human calling to be the best version of yourself.

John tells them to be baptised – a symbol of cleansing and renewal and a new start This is what brings peace of mind when we have a mind for peace.

Peace begins in our hearts. This is what John came to proclaim and to prepare the way for the one who would bring God's peace into the world.

In our own time with conflict and war regularly making headlines, it is timely to be reminded of this hopeful and positive outlook of a different way to build community, which eschews the urgencies of the powerful in favour of the needs of the powerless.

It speaks of rebalancing power, seeking to invest effort and treasure into what brings life and wellness, rather than to double down on tired models of domination and fear, winners and losers.

John was on the journey himself, even as he called others to join him, and as he pointed to the future and the one more powerful than him, who would follow him. John both invites and demands. His conviction that change was needed in the hearts of individuals.

Peace of mind is what many people are searching for today and the work at Woman's Aid in East Dunbartonshire will certainly bring peace of mind to many.

Let us listen to their video

Slide 3

“The beginning of peace begins with a smile” said Mother Theresa and how beautiful are those words, yes we can have universal declarations of human rights and they can be printed on our walls and circulated round the world on the internet, but if they are not printed on our hearts, then the document is useless, and that’s what John seeks to do, to print the rule of God's love on their hearts, to turn away from the paths of darkness, that lead to destruction and to walk on paths of light.

Mother Theresa is right, it begins with a smile, an acknowledgement of the other person, their rights and their lives are to be valued and to be encouraged.

If it doesn’t begin with a warm smile, then they are dead words. We can have the Ten Commandments as our basis of living, but if they are not lived out with a warm heart, then again they will be meaningless and a waste of space.

The song of the angels at Christmas is *Peace Be With You*, the words of Jesus after his resurrection, more than any words were peace be with you. I believe that this sums up the gospel and the life of Jesus, peace be with you.

How many lives today in our community and in our country need to hear the pipes of peace? – how many people live in fear from domestic abuse and bullying partners? how many live in the shadows and in darkness, fleeing from their homes to find safe places? this is not God's way, God's way is that we should live in his light and walk in his paths of peace.

So today we remember the birth of John, another marker on the road towards the birth of Jesus, and we remember that John was an important marker for he was preparing the hearts of his people before the coming of Jesus, and when John saw Jesus and recognised his ministry, his words were “I must decrease that he must increase” and these are perfect words for us this morning, as we continue to walk on paths of peace; Jesus must increase and we must decrease; his life lived in our hearts, and our soul must be the

shining light for our world, and when we have Christ living in us, then people will see our smile, and they will also want to see the path of peace.

Let us this second Sunday of advent, light the candle of peace in our hearts, so that we might be a light to those walking in darkness.

Amen