



And he shall be called...

Prince of Peace

Theodora Hawksley

To a conflict-ridden society, the Prince of Peace whom Isaiah speaks about is a longed-for arrival, laden with expectations – whether that society is Isaiah’s Israel, or today’s world. Theodora Hawksley explores the model of peace-making that God demonstrates in his gift of the vulnerable prince of peace that is Christ, a model that we are called to embrace.

Who longs for peace?

We don’t have to look far to find an answer: every newspaper, every news broadcast and website tells us about millions of people caught up in conflict and living in daily fear of violence in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, provinces of Nigeria, Libya, Ukraine and countless other places. We’ve become familiar with the faces of people fleeing in their thousands in desperate search of some security, washing up on the shores of Greece and walking the roadsides of Eastern Europe. In the last month, the violence that so far has been at what many of us would call a relatively safe distance has begun to touch us more directly, and now people in European capitals are living in quiet uncertainty or noisy defiance as they commute and go about ordinary life. In such a world, who doesn’t long for peace, for security, for safety – not for any distant utopia of ‘world peace’, but just for the tide of violence to recede a little, and for our real world to be a little less terrifying?

This fear and uncertainty in the face of violence gives us a visceral, rather than intellectual, connection with the promise of Isaiah 9:6. Isaiah’s prophecy about the ‘prince of peace’ is made to an Israel beset by chronic insecurity. Israel’s position, linking the Levant with modern-day Turkey and Greece to the north and Egypt to the south, made it of huge strategic importance; and its seacoast and fertile land made it highly desirable territory for invaders and tribute-seekers alike. Surrounded by dominant powers like Assyria and Egypt, the Israel of Isaiah was terribly vulnerable, and almost always threatened. Peace was short-lived, subject to the

Photo by Lordspudz at flickr.com



machinations of whichever regional power was in the ascendancy. Moreover, in a world ruled by ‘strongmen’, there was the constant risk that, if you weren’t being slaughtered, deported or taxed to death by someone else, you were being oppressed by your own ruling class (Is 10:1–4).

It is in this climate of constant insecurity that Isaiah’s promise of a ‘prince of peace’ comes alive. In such a world, how would you long for someone who could repel invaders, or fend them off with alliances; someone who would also deal justly with his own people, and so hold open a space in which ordinary people could have a chance to flourish, or even just to survive. Such rulers, Isaiah tells us later, are ‘like shelter from the wind, a refuge from the storm.’ (32:2). So Israel’s desire for peace is not a vague wish for ‘world peace’ of the kind expressed by contestants in beauty pageants, and Isaiah’s promise is not just the lovely but average good news of ‘we’re having a baby’. This is overwhelmingly, life-savingly good news: a son is born, and he is given power,

to extend his dominion of boundless peace
over the throne of David and over his kingdom
to make it secure and sustain it
in fair judgement and integrity. (9:7)

The title ‘Prince of Peace’ crowns the list of titles given to this promised ruler, and many of the other promises in the passage point towards it – the removal of the yoke of the oppressor (9:3) and the destruction of battle-gear (9:4). Peace, it seems, is at the heart of what Isaiah is promising, and what God is accomplishing.

So far so good, but Isaiah's portrait of the ideal ruler seems to be just as utopian as his images of peace, with swords being beaten into ploughshares, wolves lying down with lambs, and lions eating hay like oxen (11:6–9). Just as his images of a renewed creation seem to be a utopia – literally *u-topia*, no place at all, or none we can recognise – his image of a powerful and just prince of peace seems like nobody we know. So what sense can we make of this? What can we make of the title 'prince of peace' as applied to Christ? And what on *earth* can we make of all this in a world of such terrible violence as ours?

The clue might lie in a single word, the one that opens the second part of Isaiah (40–55), and announces God's intent to deliver Jerusalem from violence: 'console my people, console them' (40:1). That verb *nhm*, which we translate 'console' or 'comfort', appears more often in Isaiah than anywhere else in scripture, and it is key to what Isaiah tells us about God's character, God's action and the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel. So what does it mean?

In one form, *nhm* means 'to comfort', to come alongside someone in their suffering, to take pity on them or stand in sympathy with them.¹ In prophetic texts, the word is often used to describe God's comforting of Israel, and here it carries the sense that God's comfort makes a concrete difference, where human comfort cannot. In another form, the verb means 'to relent', to regret or to change one's mind, and again, it means a change of mind that issues in a change of attitude or action – so when God relents of his decision to wipe out humanity with a flood, it's this word that's used (Gen 8.21).² Perhaps surprisingly, this sense of the verb is more often used of God than of human beings.³ Those of us accustomed to singing, 'there is no shadow of changing in thee' might be somewhat perturbed by this, so it's worth making two points here. First, try not to picture God as an ogre-like, threatening and unpredictable figure, rather like a playground bully who threatens to punch you for no reason and then expects you to be pathetically thankful when he doesn't. God 'relenting' doesn't so much mean his deciding not to punish, as his deciding to rescue Israel from the consequences of her own behaviour. In 'relenting', God places a restraining hand – his [mercy](#) – between Israel's actions and what would be their natural consequences: obliteration and death. God relents in this way out of limitless faithfulness to his covenant of love and mercy,

and he does so even in the face of Israel's persistent frailty and failure.⁴ Second, this means that God's 'changing his mind' doesn't necessarily mean capriciousness or unpredictability. Rather, God's relenting or 'changing his mind' manifests his unswerving faithfulness to his deepest creative and redemptive purposes: God's loving commitment to Israel means that he cannot, or will not, allow her to self-destruct.

The Prince of Peace is a figure of consolation. In this person, God will comfort Israel in her suffering, and relent from her punishment, extricating her from the violence in which she has become enmeshed. Above all, the Prince of Peace is a figure who manifests God's powerful and living faithfulness to his covenant of love with frail, turbulent, foolish Israel. No wonder, then, that these texts of Isaiah are what the synoptic gospel writers reach for when they are trying to explain who Jesus is. Jesus is this promised son given to us, he is God's consolation of Israel, and he is the Prince of Peace. What can we make of this?

We saw earlier that Isaiah promises not just another strongman, albeit one on Israel's side, but a figure of justice, someone who will cherish and defend his own people. Jesus is God's definitive coming-close to his people in comfort, but this 'coming-close' in the incarnation is not the arrival of a strongman, exempt from our fate and unaffected by fear and insecurity: it is the arrival of a child who, from the earliest days of his life, is threatened with violence. In Jesus, God comes close in comfort to those who are victims of violence; he sides with them and shares their fate. Jesus suffers fear, humiliation, abuse, degradation and death. Like thousands of other people today caught between religious intolerance and state violence, Jesus dies silently, anonymously, tragically and – to the watching crowds – ambiguously. We've grown accustomed to seeing the phrase '*Je suis...*' on social media in the wake of atrocities, used as an expression of solidarity: *Je suis Charlie Hebdo*, *Je suis Paris*. In the incarnation and death of Jesus, God says '*Je suis*' to us: I am human, and I am with all who suffer. In Jesus, crucified, we are meant to recognise the promised Prince of Peace.

Looked at from this angle, the crucifixion does not stand out against the backdrop of human violence. Jesus does not suffer physically more than anyone else who suffers a similarly violent death. Looked at from another angle, though, the crucifixion stands out as the

symbolic peak of human violence. It is the peak of human rejection of and hostility towards God, and the gospel writers portray it in these terms.⁵ It is also the (apparently) definitive rejection of what a human person can be when completely given over to God, and to God's will. Put simply, in crucifying Jesus we are both rejecting God, and rejecting ourselves as God desires us to be. This rejection, although it is symbolic, does not happen merely in theory: it happens in practice, as the actual putting-to-death of a real human being. In nailing Jesus to the cross, we announce that we want to crucify the lot of it, and carry on unchecked with our self-destruction and violence. But, in the silence between Good Friday and the dawn of Sunday, God relents. That is what the resurrection is: God's once-and-for-all refusal of the consequences we have chosen for ourselves. In raising Jesus from the tomb, where our violence, hostility and rejection have put him, God refuses the momentum of our sinfulness, and checks our headlong slide into obliteration and death. Violence, hostility, rejection and death do not have the last word. In Jesus, risen from the dead, we are meant to recognise the Prince of Peace.

What does this mean for us today, now? Advent is a good time for asking ourselves what kind of God we are expecting to arrive, and what sort of Prince of Peace we want. Speaking personally, the more chaotically violent and unjust the world seems, the more I find myself rather hoping for a 'strongman' kind of Prince of Peace, the kind who would bang heads together and restore order with force. (It's worth noting that hoping for this kind of saviour usually means I am feeling unreasonably righteous myself, and thus exempt from the head-banging I am wishing on others.) But Christmas comes and goes each year without the 'strongman' arriving, and so I find myself contemplating what kind of Prince of Peace I have been given: first a vulnerable child, and then a crucified man.

What does it mean to acknowledge *this* one as the 'son that is given to us', the fulfilment of God's promises, and the true Prince of Peace? Among other things, I think, it gives us – Christians, the Church – a task. To be a subject of the Prince of Peace is to take on his work of 'extending his dominion of boundless peace', and thus to take on his work of consolation, of comforting and relenting. This means, first of all, a commitment to coming close in comfort to those who are facing war and violence. This must not be, as John

Paul II puts it in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 'a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far.'⁶ It needs to be comfort that, like God's comfort, comes alongside and somehow makes a difference – in prayer, in action, in striving for genuine human solidarity. Second, it means relenting. God's relenting, as we explored it earlier on, consists in refusing the consequences of human self-destructiveness. The Church's 'relenting', then, consists in her being present in contexts of violence in ways that check the momentum of human self-destructiveness, and refuse its consequences. The Church's task, like the Prince of Peace, is to continually create and hold open spaces in which ordinary life can survive, and even flourish.

The Catholic Church is already deeply involved in exactly this kind of work around the globe: pastorally accompanying people displaced by violence, remaining with people in volatile situations long after the international NGOs have left, advocating for human rights, and brokering and taking part in peace negotiations.⁷ In all these ways and in millions of smaller ones, we profess our faith in the Prince of Peace, crucified with us and risen for us, and bear witness to his now-and-coming reign of justice.

Theodora Hawksley trained as a theologian at Durham University and the University of Edinburgh, initially specialising in ecclesiology before moving on to work on peacebuilding and Catholic Social Teaching.

¹ H J Stoebe, 'Nhm (Pi) to Comfort,' in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann eds. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1997) 734–7.

² See Stoebe, *ibid.* See also Heinz-Joseph Fabry, 'Nhm' in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament Vol IX*, edited by G Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Joseph Fabry (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1998), 340–55.

³ It is used thirty times of God, compared with only seven usages in connection with human beings: see Stoebe, *ibid.* 738. Often the verb is negated when used of God, e.g. God will *not* relent from a particular course of action; this, too, manifests God's faithfulness to his purposes.

⁴ See Fabry, *ibid.* 343.

⁵ The parable of the wicked tenants is a good example: Mk 12:1–12, Mt 21:33–46; Lk 20:9–19.

⁶ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §38

⁷ For information, see the website of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network: <https://cpn.nd.edu/>