

Sept 15, 2024 – online – Home and Hope

Preservice music:

All are welcome

One is the body – John Bell – StF 688

When deep despair casts out all light – StF 399

One human family – R Wakelin – StF 687

We pray for peace – StF 719

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship/Intro

All are welcome – StF 409 --

Prayer

Intro to 'home' with Isaiah 65

Tent of Nations interview

Reflection

Peacemaker Jesus – Shirley Erena Murray

Further reflection

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Prayers for those who work for peace

Lord's Prayer

Show me how to stand for justice – M Leckebusch – StF 713

Of Home and Hope, Justice and Joy

Over the past several weeks, I've experienced two gatherings
Of Christian scholars and activists speaking out for justice and peace,
Often within the context of 'home' -- and that in the context of justice and peace.
For many of us, 'home' is a place of safety, of security, of belonging --
But in the gatherings I attended, we explored several challenges to 'home':
When our homes are not places of safety or security --
When people are forced from their homes by war and conflict or climate change --

The two gatherings were the Oxford Institute of World Methodist Theologians
A gathering of scholars from around the world that happens about every five years.
The second was Greenbelt -- a kind of Christian Glastonbury that focuses on issues
Of peace and justice within communities and the earth -- from a faith perspective.
Both of these gatherings were very exciting and informative
And left me with abundant ideas that I will want to pass on to you in the future.

For today, I want to focus attention on a concept of 'home',
A faith concept that is based on justice and joy, on peace -- and on hope.
I say 'hope' because we are increasingly aware that not all of our homes ARE places
Of justice and joy and peace...
And yet we know that as a goal for ourselves and all God's people --
And so we live in Hope

Sing: All Are Welcome --

"A place where love can dwell and all can safely live...
Where hearts learn to forgive..."

Lord Jesus, you who grew up in a carpenter's home
And learned about family and safety
and danger and the need for forgiveness,
Come and be with us.
You who knew the stories of ancestors who had travelled far and wide
Seeking refuge from famine and conflict,
Come and be with us.
You who as a child sought refuge with your family in Egypt --
And as an adult said that the Son of Man had no home to lay his head,
Come and be with us.
Be with us today as we consider situations today
Where homes are fragile and safety is fleeting.
Show us ways of dealing with uncertainty and conflict:
Show us again the ways of peace and justice. Amen.

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At both the Oxford Institute and the Greenbelt Festival
I met people who were addressing challenging topics concerning 'home.'
The Oxford Institute was a gathering of theologians from around the world --
Some of the nearly 150 papers presented were very academic,
With scholarly persons putting their best thinking into the situations of the world.
Many of the papers addressed some of the most difficult situations --
And the papers that resounded most with me were those with practical applications.

Indeed, the group that Oscar Siu, our Chinese lay pastor, and I participated in
Was the Practical Theology group –
And there were an abundance of presentations
about how our faith interacts with and demands practical interaction with daily life.

Oscar and I presented a paper on Host and Guest Relationships
within our Chinese congregation,
especially looking at how newcomers and established groups interact.
Others presented on topics ranging from loneliness in society
To ‘disappeared persons’ in Central America
and struggles of a Methodist congregation in Siberia and Africa,
From rural isolation in the USA
to third-world scholars invited in – but excluded from –
Full participation in Western universities
From LGBT issues to disability issues
From environmental issues to neo-colonialism.

These and so many more showed a deep concern for how we live together
In safety and peace and with justice and joy.

There were well over 150 presentations made,
And though we were there for 8 days,
None of us could attend or fully absorb all of them!

What I did come away with was a renewed sense of the deep challenges of our world
And the deep concern that propels so many to find new ways
To express their Christian care for the Other – be it stranger, neighbour, or creation.

A few weeks after the Oxford Institute, I was at the annual Greenbelt Festival in Kettering –
Along with an estimated 20,000 persons interested in faith and spirituality,
Particularly with regard to justice and peace issues
Expressed through music and drama and art and activism.

If the Oxford folk concentrated primarily on thinking through the issues,
Carefully, theologically, prayerfully ...

Then the Greenbelt folk were intent on learning more about the issues
So that they could *act* – again, prayerfully, compassionately, spiritually.

Again at Greenbelt, many of the issues had to do with ‘home’ --
Social justice, peace in Israel/Palestine, LGBT issues, environmental issues.

There was a strong emphasis on refugee and immigration issues,
On care for the earth and all its people.

And there was a wide representation of people there –
From babes in arms to the elderly,
From able-bodied persons to many using mobility devices.

It occurs to me that one of the most basic things at Greenbelt
Was living together in situations very close to the ‘earth’.

Most of the thousands attending were living in tents for the duration of the festival.
All of us were at one point or another queueing for toilets or showers...

I had my first night’s sleep in a yurt I shared with seven other women –
All strangers initially, but soon part of one big family.

I must admit that sleeping in the yurt was initially the bit for which I had the most anxiety,
But in fact, I had the best sleep I’d had in months!

In both these events, ‘home’ featured prominently, and I want to explore more of that today.

We've already spoken of home as a place of safety and security,
Of belonging and welcome.

What does 'home' mean in the bible?

There are several words translated as 'home' in the Old Testament –

Bayith or *maqom* or *ohel* in Hebrew – a house or a place or a tent

Oikos in Greek – which can mean either the building or the persons occupying it

I remember my Greek teacher showing me

that 'oikos' is the root of both economy – how we carry out transactions with others
and ecumenical – the 'household' of all of us together.

Isaiah 65:21-22 is part of a larger scripture known as The Peaceable Kingdom

Which we shall read later.

For now hear these verses that speak of 'home':

21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat.

For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people;

my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands.

These words have come to have some very practical applications recently

As I've learned of the work of a group of Palestinian Christians

Called the Tent of Nations.

As the attention of the world has been focussed on the situation in Gaza,

The Palestinians – both Muslim and Christian – who live in the West Bank,

Have been somewhat ignored.

At Annual Conference back in June and again at Greenbelt,

I heard about the Tent of Nations folks,

And I wanted to share some of their story with you.

Daoud Nassar heads up the Tent of Nations –

Daoud was born in Bethlehem – a town whose name means 'House of Bread' –

And he will share some of the story with you now.

[Interview]

As I reflect further on Daoud's story, I am struck with his firm insistence on hope –
On justice, on the kind of Peaceable Kingdom that we spoke of earlier from Isaiah 65.

Hear the further selection from Isaiah 65:17-25:

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
²⁰ No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
²² They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
²³ They shall not labour in vain,
or bear children for calamity;*
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
²⁴ Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

This is the promise that Daoud and his family are holding onto –
When troubles and struggles come,
It is o-so-tempting to respond in anger and violence,
But they are living out their faith and showing the world another way.

At Greenbelt, I was introduced to a new hymn by Shirley Erena Murray,
Which speaks of Jesus as 'Peacemaker Jesus' –
I'll share this with you now.

[Repeat words]

Peacemaker Jesus – Shirley Erena Murray

<https://vimeo.com/775580121>.

Peacemaker Jesus, Word of good courage,
Voice for compassion, speak to our lives!

Strong brother Jesus, wielding no weapon,
Cure us of conflict, speak to our lives!

Spirited Jesus, turning the tables,
Fierce for God's justice, speak to our lives.

World-changing Jesus, shaking the powers,
Your peace and justice speak through our lives!

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At Greenbelt, I also overheard a session being led with young people

Who were thinking about some of the world issues –

And the leader asked them: “Who here has power?”

When a few tentatively raised their hands,

The leader responded with: “You ALL have power! Recognise your power and use it!”

Certainly, there are things that each of us can do –

Often we're very hesitant to do such things, especially when risk is involved –

But the riskiest situation of all is when we – individually and collectively –

Refuse to use the power that we have!

In a few moments, we are going to be praying together about these situations...

Because prayer is an action we can all do.

But if prayer is just words, then it has little effect.

The most effective prayer comes from listening to – and working with – God.

Allowing God to move us through our thoughts, our concerns, our imaginations

To understand the power we have and how we are to use that power.

Before our time of intercessions, I invite you to listen to this modern version

Of the Christmas hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem:

[Youtube version of O Little Town]

Lord God of Palestine and Israel, of Jews and Muslims and Christians,
We join in praying for the Home of Bread – for Bethlehem –
And for all it represents of our broken world.

We first pray a formal prayer written by The Very Revd Canon Richard Swell,
Dean of St George's College Jerusalem...

A prayer for peace in the Middle East.

O God of all justice and peace we cry out to you in the midst of the pain and trauma
of violence and fear which prevails in the Holy Land.

Be with those who need you in these days of suffering; we pray for people of all faiths –
Jews, Muslims and Christians and for all people of the land.

While we pray to you, O Lord, for an end to violence and the establishment of peace,
we also call for you to bring justice and equity to the peoples.

Guide us into your kingdom where all people are treated with dignity and honour
as your children for to all of us you are our Heavenly Father.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen

And then we pray our individual prayers –
For people and situations that we know of
Where the peace and joy and safety of home is threatened.

For individual homes and families around us.
For communities that are struggling.
For nations that are at war.
For faith groups that find themselves in conflict.
For political leaders, that they might pursue the ways that lead to peace.

And we pray for communities such as Tent of Nations
That are actively pursuing the way of peace that you have shown us.
Give them courage, give them sustenance, given them encouragement.
Help them know they are not alone.

Lord, help us as well to recognise the power that each of us has –
Power to make homes places of safety and security,
Power to use non-violent means in our lives.
Power to refuse to accept victim status
and to look for ways we can turn challenge into creativity,
ways we can channel anger into positive action,
ways we can model peace and justice and joy for others.

Lord's Prayer...