

Elisha the Peacemaker

(St Andrews Baptist Church, 22 March 2003)

(Readings: 2 Kings 6:8-23; Isa 2:1-5)

I don't need to explain why I chose the topic of peace for my sermon tonight, but I do want to explain, right at the start, that I am not going to discuss the rights and wrongs of the war in Iraq. I've no doubt there are differences among us on that. What I don't want you to do is to listen to this sermon expecting to find out what I think about it. That will distract you from what I do want to say.

The Old Testament might not seem the obvious resource to go to for a message about peace. Many modern Christians are understandably troubled by the wars of the Old Testament. For one thing there are so many of them: the sounds of battle are heard and the blood of wholesale slaughter of enemies flows in chapter after chapter after chapter of the Old Testament narratives. Not only is war a normal and frequent part of Israel's life; it seems to be a normal and frequent part of God's involvement in Israel's history and his way of carrying out his purposes in the world. There seems precious little of that sensitivity to the horrors of war and sympathy for the victims that most people we know, Christians or not, and even those who support the war in Iraq, have felt acutely in recent weeks. Not only does such sensitivity seem to us to be closer to the spirit of Jesus as we know him from the Gospels. It also seems more in accord with the character of God revealed in the Old Testament itself, who is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. These are real problems. I cannot solve all the problems of war in the Old Testament, but I want to encourage you to look more carefully at all that belligerence and butchery. For it is not all of piece. There are parts of the Old Testament that rise above it, beacons of hope in a very dark world, lighting up the purpose of God in a way that we often miss in the fog of battle that fills many a story of Israel's wars. This evening we shall look at two of these highlights, each in its very different way a promise of peace in the midst of war.

One of these, the prophecy of Isaiah, is much better known than the other, which is hidden away in a rather obscure part of the Old Testament histories. But this story of Elisha and the army of Aram deserves to be much better known. It is, after all, so far as I know the only case in the Bible in which war is ended without any violence whatsoever. It is a story that may speak to us just now as it might not in more ordinary times.

Elisha the prophet is one of those few Old Testament figures who is called 'the man of God,' a man exceptionally close to God, knowing in important ways God's mind, representing God, speaking for God and also acting for God, both in the courts of kings, the affairs of state and nation, and in the homes and lives of ordinary people. He is perhaps the Old Testament prophet most like Jesus. His miracles often resemble those of Jesus, acts of God's compassion and grace and healing. Elisha is a man, we feel, who is close to God's heart, who sees the world with God's concerns.

Perhaps this is the case with war. Elisha had much to do with war, because he lived during the seemingly interminable wars between northern Israel and her

neighbour, Aram or Syria, the kingdom of Damascus, in the ninth century BC. He certainly did not hold aloof from the political and military events of his day, but was closely involved in them - involved *as* a 'man of God' who brought God's concerns and purposes to bear on them.

Our story starts by telling us how Elisha many times prevented battles happening. We've heard a lot recently about military intelligence. Elisha was the best military intelligence service you could wish for. As one of the king of Aram's advisors puts it, Elisha could hear what the king said even in his bedroom. Elisha used this charismatic gift to foil the Aramaean army's attempts to ambush the king of Israel and his troops. Every time the Aramaeans take up position Elijah tells the king of Israel where they are so that he can avoid them. But the king of Aram gets tired of this happening, investigates and hears that it is Elisha who is to blame.

He send a very large army to the city where Elisha is: he was certainly not underestimating the difficulty of capturing a man of God. During the night the army lays siege to the city, and early next morning a servant of Elisha reports to him the huge military build-up all around the city. The servant is panic-stricken, but Elisha, himself quite unafraid, asks God to open the eyes of the servant to see the true reality of the situation. This story revolves around instances of opening eyes and seeing, covering eyes and not seeing. They tell us something about how perceptions of the world, accurate and misleading, govern what people do in war. To see how things really stand is not a simple matter of empirical observation. Many a war has been fought out of misperceptions and prosecuted with fatal misunderstandings. Deliberate deception - propaganda - is indeed one of the instruments of war, as we've already seen in Iraq this week.

It takes a man of God to reveal the truth from God's perspective. In response to Elisha's prayer, God gives his servant a vision: a great army of horses and fiery chariots standing on the nearby mountain, ready to descend upon the Aramean army. The word 'fiery' reveals to us that these are heavenly forces, and if we know the other stories of Elisha and his master Elijah we shall remember that both prophets were themselves called 'the chariots and the horsemen of Israel' - because the protection of Israel lay in their hands. Elisha's servants vision does not really mean that there is another army out there, a supernatural one, about to engage the enemy troops. It means that God's power to defend Israel is available to Elisha himself. Elisha is going to deliver Israel.

Elisha prays again, 'Strike this people, please...' One might think that he is calling on God to use something like military power, to strike down the army, to destroy it. But Elisha has an alternative strategy, a non-violent one. His prayer continues: 'Strike this people, please, with blindness.' Blindness is not the best translation; something like 'confusion of sight' would be better, because it is not that the Aramaean soldiers cannot now see anything, but that they misperceive. They *recognize* neither the city nor Elisha, and so when Elisha tells them they are in the wrong place and he will take them to the city where Elisha is, they believe him.

So the apparently - but only apparently - defenceless man of God leads the whole, vast army of Aram. It's an almost comic picture of a man of God, because he is a man of God, outmanoeuvring huge military might. As the Old Testament sometimes observes, it is foolish to rely on military might rather than to trust in God,

because so often God's ways and plans are not those of the military, and it is God's will that prevails in the end, whatever the short-term appearances.

When the eyes of the army are opened to see their real situation they find themselves inside the king of Israel's capital and apparently at his mercy. But again it is really Elisha the man of God who has control of the situation, and his mercy, reflecting God's, is more generous than the king's. The king assumes he should kill the Aramean soldiers: 'Father, shall I kill them?', he asks Elisha. '*Shall* I kill them?', he repeats, rather too eagerly, one feels. But this is not necessarily a vindictive suggestion. Perhaps he thinks it the best way to secure peace. With a large part of the Aramean army 'taken out,' as military people euphemistically put it, the king of Aram might stop attacking Israel. Or would they? Such a massacre could easily trigger a much worse cycle of revenge.

'Actually they're not your prisoners,' says Elisha. 'And, look, they've been marching for hours, they need food and drink.' At a stroke Elisha turns the enemies into guests. The king sees this, and switches at once to a different social code, the obligations of hospitality. He knows as much about generosity in hospitality as he does of ruthlessness in war. Honoured guests deserve a banquet, and this is what they get. Richly satisfied, the soldiers are sent home. The text leaves us to imagine what they reported to their king. But the long-running state of war comes to an end. You don't attack those who treat you as honoured guests.

So Elisha the man of God proves wonderfully resourceful in finding ways of ending war without violence. It's worth noticing that this is one of the few places in the Old Testament where love of enemies is recommended. The Old Testament, of course, teaches love of neighbour - love for one's fellow-Israelite - but there are no more than glimpses of that universal love for all people, extending even to national enemies that Jesus so forcefully requires in the Sermon on the Mount. Under Elisha's guidance, the king of Israel's practice of love of enemies turns the enemies into friends. The principle is a revolutionary one: that enemies are not expendable, that the lives of enemy soldiers are no less valuable than one's own, that God cares even about the lives of those who attack his own people, that God's mercy extends to them also. This story puts a big question mark against the common-sense assumption that we take too often for granted: that it takes violence to end violence. It sets us in search of better ways that deserve at least a chance. Perhaps they will not always work, but how can we know that until we have put as much ingenuity and resourcefulness into peace as we do into war? No one just now can fail to be astonished by the technological wizardry and the strategic skill, the sheer brilliant inventiveness, of the American conduct of war in Iraq. But reflect for a moment. Elisha's Israelite contemporaries doubtless felt much the same amazement at his extraordinarily original way of waging peace.

Some of you may be thinking: Yes, but Elisha had the benefit of a miracle. He did indeed. And no doubt we are not ourselves entitled to expect such miracles of God whenever we might like them. So does the miraculous nature of the story rob it of any real relevance to us? Not if we remember what biblical miracles are usually for. What a miracle does, as an out of the ordinary event, is to draw attention to God's action in the world. It isn't, of course, that God is not just as much at work in the sort of things we ordinarily experience. But in what happens regularly we easily take God for granted. A miracle is when God takes us by surprise, grabs our

attention, in order to highlight something about his purpose and intentions that we might not otherwise notice. So the miracles of Jesus, for example, are not just remarkable occurrences: Jesus doesn't pull rabbits out of hats, he heals people, he provides for people's needs, he casts out demons, he brings about remarkable instances of God's will for the healing and wholeness of human life. Miracles *point out* for us God's purposes for human life and as such they also *point forwards, to the future*. In Jesus' terms they point to the kingdom of God, which happens fragmentarily now in the world as it is, amidst all the sin, suffering and death of this world, but will happen completely in God's future. In miracles we glimpse God's will to deliver us from all the evils of human history. They are God's way of highlighting the direction in which his purpose is going towards his kingdom.

So biblical miracles often correlate with prophetic visions of the coming kingdom. When Jesus raises the dead, albeit restoring them only to this mortal life, we glimpse that resurrection to life eternal that prophets picture for us in their visions of the time when God's will will finally prevail over all that opposes it. So we can perhaps move rather appropriately from Elisha's miracle of peaceableness to Isaiah's vision of the day when the nations will no longer learn war. It's evidently so important a vision that it occurs twice in the Old Testament prophets, in Micah as well as in Isaiah. No other prophecy is repeated like that, virtually identically, from prophet to prophet.

The prophet imagines mount Zion, the hill on which the temple stood, elevated to become the highest mountain in the world, so that all the nations may see it and be drawn to it. They go there in order to learn God's ways: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord... so that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' So when Isaiah says a little later on that the nations will not learn war any more, the meaning is that they will not learn war because they have learned God's ways instead. And something else is very important: God, says Isaiah, 'shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate between many peoples.' This too is a precondition for peace. Disputes between nations will be settled justly and non-violently because God's justice will prevail. Therefore armaments will have no further use and can be converted to positively useful purposes: 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruninghooks.' So the vision that climaxes in the picture of universal peace bases that peace on knowledge of God and God's justice.

This prophecy must have spoken originally with great power and promise to people wearied of the interminable wars of Israel's history, sickened by the horrors of war, longing for peace, as most people for most of history have done. If we doubted the Old Testament's sensitivity to war, if we thought God's people Israel must have been brutalized by the rhetoric and the practice of war that we find so often in its pages, this vision promising peace - one of several in the prophets - should put us right. It speaks not to those hungry for war - who would need to be addressed in a very different way - but to those longing for peace. It promises that God also longs for peace and purposes to establish peace. But I should not say the word peace again, in an Old Testament context, without pointing out that the word peace in the Bible generally means much more than what we usually mean when we use the word peace simply as the opposite of war. Peace in the Bible is not the mere absence of war or conflict, but has a holistic sense of well-being, welfare, wholeness, security, prosperity, security - to use a modern phrase, we might say it refers to human

flourishing. Peace is human life and human society as it should be. The biblical writers knew very well that violence and war have devastating effects on a very broad scale. Not only do people get killed, but people live in fear, the economy is destroyed and poverty created, land is desolated, and so on. Just as peace is a broad and very positive category of human well-being, so war, in disrupting peace, does wideranging damage to human life and society.

So what Isaiah foresees is a world in which God's ways are learned and practised by all the nations, resulting in human flourishing in every respect, including, very importantly, justice. The roots of war and violence are removed. No longer do some nations exploit others economically. No longer do some seek power and advantage over others. No longer, we might add, do nations misrepresent and misperceive each other. And so the most desirable flower of human flourishing comes about: the abolition of war. It is the climax of the passage because Isaiah's contemporaries knew so well how war destroyed everything else that was good and desirable in human life.

It is a utopian vision of God's final purpose for his world. So does it, we might reasonably ask, have any relevance for us? The realists, the advocates of *Realpolitik*, would certainly tell us: no. We do not yet live in this vision and it is dangerous to pretend we do. There is something in that. But notice that Isaiah is not content to predict this future and just leave it there as a future we may merely contemplate. He adds (v 5): 'O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!' He is echoing there the words he had earlier put in the mouths of the nations: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord... so that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' The nations may not be saying that yet, but God's people Israel do go up to the temple, they do learn God's ways, and so they at least should, here and now, already be walking in the light of the Lord. The vision already lights the way for the people of God. Knowing God's universal purpose of peace, God's people must and can be, here and now, a peaceable people.

This, I want to say, is the primary lesson of peace that churches need to learn. Not at all that they should opt out of the world in which war happens and may sometimes be prevented. But that peace has to start at home, in the community of God's people. Unless and until we are a peaceable people, we cannot hope to know or to do the right things for peace in the world. The roots of violence - envy, selfish ambition, wanting our own way, intolerance, pride, resentment, unforgiveness, and so on - all those roots of violence must be torn up in our own lives and in our common life. Only then can we model peaceableness for the world. Take a look some time at some those lists of vices the New Testament writers sometimes provide. We don't usually think they need thinking about, but if you do think about them you will notice how many of those vices, the works of the flesh as Paul calls them, are the opposite of peaceableness and the roots of violence and conflict and war. Conversely, the wisdom that comes from above, says James, the lifestyle we learn from God, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.

Elisha was a peacemaker because he was the man of God. Not many of us, if any, are called as individuals to represent God as he could. But we are called as the body of Christ, as a community of Christian people, to learn God's peace and to

practise God's peace. And as we do, we may well be inspired, as Elisha was, to imaginative resourcefulness in seeking peace. It is what the world needs.