



Peace on Earth?

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Well it is a delight to be here with you this evening. I have been asked to address the question of peace on Earth.

At a time maybe, when we're questioning whether the idea of peace is something we should give up on, I remember having someone come to me at the end of one of the talks I had been giving and say, "You know you remind me of other speakers I've heard from your organization."

He said, "I'm still confused but I'm at a much higher level than I was before."

What we will be trying to do this evening is scratch the surface of a very complex global problem. The concept of peace is a simple one, but the cost of peace is at a far higher level than most of us are prepared to pay, and that is one of the challenges that we face right now.

In the last two to three years, I've been to between 80 to 100 different countries: Northern Hemisphere; Southern Hemisphere; Eastern world; Western world. Every government that has invited me to speak has always given me the same question to answer, it's about reconciliation.

Is peace possible? Why are we in the situation we're in? And most importantly of all, is there any hope?

Last year, one of the largest ever global surveys in democracy perception was performed by a German thinktank. They surveyed 125,000 people in 50 different countries, 64% of the respondents replied that their governments rarely or never act in their interests, and the countries which came out bottom? Austria, Sweden and Denmark, *those well-known countries that never cater to the needs of their citizens or their people*. So, the question is, what is going on?

We live in a world right now where people are crying out for justice, but maybe with much more bitterness and anger than before. There is a very interesting verse in the Old Testament in the book of Amos where the prophet says you have turned "*justice into bitterness*" so all your righteousness tastes like poison fruit (Amos 5:7).

Now do you hear what he is saying? He is saying if the quest for justice becomes bitter, even if you get what is right, it tastes like poison to everybody else. And our world right now is filled with bitter cries for justice and it's tearing us apart.

We can maybe rephrase that, if the quest for justice is *rooted in* bitterness, even when you get justice, the bitterness remains behind. But if the quest for justice is *rooted in* love and compassion, when you get justice what you're left with is love and compassion. Those two things work out very differently at a fundamental way in any society or nation.

So, we have to ask this question, which *has* to do with motivation, what is it that motivates us and should motivate us? And why is it that in every nation of the world right now it feels that we are in the process of losing those things which held us together.

We talk a lot about peace-keeping. But peace keeping at its best is trying to keep two warring factions apart by imposing a superior force in between them. Peace-making, however, is something very different and what we need in this world right now are peacemakers. People who can bring peace where at the moment there isn't. But it seems at times we really don't understand the process.

What I would like to do, if I could, is talk about our **internal, external, and eternal** search for peace. And I would like to phrase it with *certain* remarks that Jesus Christ himself made.

The loss of *internal peace* we have is a result not just of what other people have done to us. But what we have done to ourselves. That sense where we somehow feel that we ourselves have failed.

I was speaking in Oxford just a couple of weeks ago and one of the students in the audience at the end of the talk raised their hand. It was the last question and their question was, "You talked about forgiveness, do you know how hard it is to forgive yourself let alone anyone else?"

That is the challenge of internal peace. Is it possible to find a way by which we can deal with that inner conflict?

We are also looking for *external peace*, peace with other people. One of my colleagues, who lived in Asia for many years, was once speaking to a very mixed audience like tonight's, where I feel very much at home. My mother is from Cyprus, my father is English, I was raised first of all in Sharjah in the mid 1970s, when there was one hotel in Dubai. I don't know if you have been to Dubai recently, but there is more than one hotel now. From there we went to Saudi Arabia and so on, so very much I have spent my life being raised in all kinds of different cultures.

But it is interesting when you ask the question about external peace. What does it mean to find peace with other people? This colleague of mine was speaking to a very mixed audience as I was saying and he said to them, "I would like you to imagine peace."

And then he asked them to draw a picture of what they imagined. Then everybody shared the pictures they had: one person thought of snow-capped mountains; another person thought of a field filled with flowers; another person saw this beautifully still lake that was reflecting the mountains in the background behind them. All of these pictures had one thing in common: they had no people in them.

Now isn't that interesting? When asked to imagine peace, the first thing we do is to eliminate everybody else, and if you work in HR you know exactly what I am talking about.

Is it possible to find peace with others?

And of course, we ask the question in terms of an *eternal search*. "God, if you're there, is it possible to find peace with you?" In some parts of the Western world when they bury people, they put the words R.I.P. - Rest In Peace - but is that when you find it? When you're dead? Or is it possible to know some kind of peace before then?

Well, Jesus Christ told a very famous story which I would like to borrow from because there is *the* possibility that many of you would have heard it before, and I'm hoping you would be able to remember it. It's the story he told that's recorded in Luke chapter 15: the story of a family in which there *would* be no peace whatsoever.

It's the story of a Father with two sons, and the younger one comes and says, "I would like my share of the inheritance now please."

In other words, he comes to his Father, taps his watch and says, "I was rather hoping you would be dead by now. But you're still here, and I can't wait any longer, so just give me the cash now, and I would like to leave."

It doesn't matter what culture you're in, that is insulting. The Father divides his property between the two children. The older one stays at home. We don't have time to talk about him tonight. The younger one quickly sells everything he has. The emphasis is on speed. Now there are many businesspeople in the room, so you will understand this, if you have to liquidate everything with speed, that means you never get the best price for it. But that doesn't matter because he has brought shame and dishonor on his name and on his family. So, he *wants* to convert what he has into cash and he *wants* to go a long way away.

Well, he loses everything, and he begins to starve, and while he is in that situation he says, "Here I am starving to death." He is thinking with his stomach. "My Father's hired hands have food to spare." He is still thinking with his stomach. "I know what I will do," he says, "I will go

back to my Father, and say, 'I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be called your son, make me a hired servant.'”

Well what do the hired servants have that he doesn't have? Food. He is still thinking with his stomach. This is a very good Middle Eastern story. As a matter of fact, it translates well into Africa and indeed into any part of the world where hospitality is considered important.

Now there is a problem though. That speech sounds very impressive until you remember one simple fact. The group of people Jesus was talking to had a hero by the name of Moses. Moses had a showdown with one of the great political Emperors of his time called Pharaoh. And every time Moses confronted Pharaoh, Pharaoh would say to Moses, “I have sinned against heaven and against you.”

Everybody who knows that story knows that Pharaoh's repentance isn't real. When he says, “Sorry,” he doesn't mean it. So, when Jesus tells the story of this young boy who says, “I'll go to my Father and say to my Father, 'I've sinned against heaven and against you, I'm not worthy to be called your son'”, they've all heard those words before. From the mouth of someone who was known to be fake.

The guy is just thinking about himself. And here is why, in many Middle Eastern cultures, this story is known as the *Story of the Running Father*. Here is this young boy estranged from his Father, no ability to pay him back, he's lost all the money he has, and now he just simply wants food. And as the son is coming home, the Father runs all the way out to him, throws his arms around him and kisses him.

Many of you in the room would appreciate this, kissing is very important in some parts of the world. In Jesus' culture, a slave would fall on his face and kiss his master's feet. A student would fall on their knees, take their teacher's hand, and kiss the hand. And in case you're wondering in this scenario I am the teacher and you are the students.

However, brothers, friends, equals, embrace each other and they kiss on the neck or the cheek. It's a sign of peace, it's a sign of forgiveness. When Jesus said in this story, the Father ran to the son and before the son spoke, threw his arms around him and kissed him, where could he kiss him? Well if you're hugging someone, the only place you can kiss is on the neck, or the cheek. The Father offers forgiveness and peace to the son before the son thinks of asking for it.

When the son receives the forgiveness from his Father, he breaks down and he cannot complete his speech. He begins to speak, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am not worthy to be called your son.” And he stops.

He can't finish the sentence, “... make me a hired servant,” because he suddenly realizes the issue isn't the spent money, the issue is he has a broken relationship with his Father. And his Father was willing to forgive him even before he thought of asking for forgiveness.

Just over a year ago, I was in a part of the world I will have to leave unnamed, speaking with a man who's on one of the "most wanted" lists in the world. His opening question to me was really quite interesting, we were there with a small group of people. His opening question was, "If someone believes the wrong thing, does their life have any value?"

Well, here is my tip, if you are ever talking to a well-known international terrorist, you ask them a question back to get them talking first. My question was, "Sheikh, what do you think?"

And he took 15 minutes to say, "No." If someone believes the wrong thing, their life has no value.

Well when I was able to speak, I shared something out of this story with him. I said, "Sheikh, the Father loved the son, even when the son was doing the wrong thing, and believing the wrong thing."

He exploded in anger and said, "Young man," - I am now of the age, when someone calls me "young man," I take that as a compliment and not as an insult, - "This is totally idealistic."

He said, "No Father could ever love a child who had done such a thing in this way. The Father should kill the son."

I said, "But Sheikh, the Father that Jesus is talking about, is not an earthly Father, this is our heavenly Father. This is how God has loved us."

The reason we celebrate Christmas, as Adbu so eloquently already said, is not that God is somewhat vaguely interested in us and, if we will beg for forgiveness, he will forgive us.

The Christian message is much more profound than that. Even before we knew we needed forgiveness, God broke into this world and offers us forgiveness and peace as a gift. If we receive it, we can be forgiven completely, it's how we find internal peace.

Internal peace is not found by learning to forgive yourself. It's actually found in receiving forgiveness from someone else and it changes everything. Jesus went on to say we need to learn to forgive other people as we have been forgiven. Which begs the question, how have we been forgiven? The answer is contained in what has already been said. God is offering forgiveness to people before they knew they needed it and before they even asked for it.

Peace and forgiveness are offered as gifts and the way you receive it is by saying, "Sorry." Saying, "Sorry," is how we receive anyone else's offer for peace.

I am sure none of you have ever had an argument with your spouse. But imagine the highly unlikely circumstance in which you have had such a fight. I find it interesting when you hear how husbands apologize to their wives. They normally say something like, "I'm sorry if I've hurt you."

Now this is not an apology, this is a simple statement of regret. What it means is the following: "Things seemed to be fine, until a couple of minutes ago, when I said what I shouldn't have said. Now my life has become much more complicated than it was before, and I'm feeling a bit sorry for myself. And I'm feeling really sorry, so if I've hurt you, I'm sorry." That is not an apology. That is a statement of regret.

An apology is unequivocal, "I'm sorry, I was wrong." When we are willing to admit where we are wrong, and where we have failed, we receive the forgiveness of the other party. It is one of the most incredible things to experience. If I were to insult you this evening, and then come and apologize to you, and say "I'm sorry", and you were willing to forgive me, the very next day, when I see you, even if you walk into the back of this room and I see you 100 meters away, I don't need to speak to you at all. I need to look into your eyes for one half of a second and I know whether I have been forgiven or not. And that is how forgiveness works.

Now here is the trouble. When we have been wronged and when people have done terrible things to us, forgiveness is the most costly thing we can do. When you forgive the one who has hurt you, betrayed you, lied about you, stolen from you, or done whatever it is, forgiveness feels impossible. It is the most expensive thing we will do, and you are right.

In this story, Jesus is saying, God is willing to forgive us, but it is going to cost him everything. The Father offers forgiveness to the son. The Father puts a robe on his shoulders, sandals on his feet and a ring on his finger. The Father pays to extend his own forgiveness. This is why elsewhere in the Bible we read that God did not spare his own son. Or we read very famously in John 3:16: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

The price of reconciliation that God was willing to pay, to reconcile us to him, was everything. It cost him everything. That is the price of peace. Peace isn't simply the absence of conflict. It is the presence of love in a relationship.

That is when you know you are at peace with somebody. That is one of the most costly things that you can possibly imagine. The problem with our desire for peace, is we think it is one of the strongest desires we have. The trouble is it is not strong enough. The reason why we know it is not strong enough is that we are not willing to forgive as we have been forgiven. We actually want the other side to pay. That is why when we watch any movie and we see the bad guy; we don't want the bad guy to be caught and put on trial. We want the bad guy to suffer and die. Slowly, painfully, obviously and preferably multiple times.

John 3:16 is the first mention of the word love in the Gospel of John. That is the first time the word is used. And it is used in the context of God being willing to give himself, to come into this world, to pay the price for what we have done, in order that we may know forgiveness. If we will only accept it and receive it. Do you know that kind of peace?

The eternal peace that *we can have* with God becomes the basis on which we learn to forgive ourselves. I don't know if you've noticed, when we have done something wrong, we generally tend to confess enough of what we need to confess in order to be forgiven.

For example, if I've done something terrible to you, I will tell you 60 percent of what I did, 70 percent of what I did, 80 percent of what I did, I will tell you enough so you know that I'm serious and I mean it. But rarely will I tell you 100 percent of what I did. Why? Because if you knew everything I did, everything I thought, and everything I said you will be so angry with me, that you wouldn't forgive me at all.

I tell you just enough so you know that it is serious, and you forgive me and I hope you will never find out the rest. It makes for a very uneasy peace.

But this kind of peace with God, it's total. If God sees everything, knows everything, discerns everything, there is nothing you cannot tell him that he has not already seen. The offer of peace he makes is complete. *Based on* peace with him, we can find peace with ourselves and therefore build a bridge of peace to other people.

It is hard not to fall in love with somebody who has served you well. When I was about 15 years old my mother asked me to meet a friend of hers. I met her, I spent the minimum amount of time that was necessary to be polite when you're introduced to one of your parents' friends you have never met before. Then when this minimum time has elapsed, I used the excuse that no parent can every refuse their child. I said, "Please excuse me, I now have to go do my homework."

Of course, this is the perfect excuse to break any commitment because no parent is brave enough to say, "No you won't do your homework, you will stay."

The next day talking to my mother, my mother said, "I am surprised you didn't want to spend more time with this woman."

I said, "Well, I don't know her."

And my mother looked at me and said, "Have I never told you the story?"

I said, "What story?"

She said, "When you were two years old, I took you outside to play and we were near a river."

My mother was there with some other friends and she was just talking with another friend when she momentarily looked away and, as she looked away, I was a very fast crawler and I crawled right up to the edge of the river and I fell in. My mother didn't notice. At that time, one of my mother's best friends was walking along the banks of the river and saw what happened.

My mother looked up when she heard this woman scream. And as she looked up, she saw this good friend of hers run and then jump into an icy cold river. My mother thought she had gone crazy. But when this woman stood up holding me *then* it was my mother's turn to run. She ran as fast as she could. She took me out of this woman's arms, she helped her out, over the bank and on to dry land. That woman that day saved my life.

Well when my mother told me this story. My first response was, "Will you please invite her back. Can you invite her for dinner?" because I wanted to meet the woman who had saved my life.

Jesus Christ has done more than just jump into some icy cold water on our behalf. He was willing to pay the price and gave up his own life that we may find peace with him and it changes everything.

Once a year the Queen of England makes an address to the nation, and a couple of years ago this is how she ended up her talk and this is how I would like to end my talk to you this evening. As she came toward the end of her national address she said this, "Finding hope in times of adversity, is one of the themes at Christmas, Jesus was born into a world full of fear, angels came to frighten shepherds with hope in their voices, *'fear not they urged, we bring you tidings of great joy, which will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord.'*

Although we are capable of many great acts of kindness," she said, "history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves, from our recklessness, and our greed. God sent into the world a unique person, neither a philosopher nor a general, as important as those are, but a savior with the power to forgive. Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families. It can restore friendships, and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love. And in the last verse of this beautiful carol of *Oh Little Town of Bethlehem*, there is prayer,

*'Oh holy child of Bethlehem to send us we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.'*

It is my prayer that, on this Christmas day, we would all find room in our lives for the message of the angels and the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Maybe as you sit here this evening, you're realizing there is a great need for peace in your own heart. Someone famously said, "it is hard to see the wall of your prison when the cell is made of glass."

When we are imprisoned through bitterness and hatred, we find ourselves locked in a cell. The walls of which we very rarely see. When we realize our own need *of* forgiveness it becomes so much easier to forgive others. Especially when we realize we are called to extend forgiveness in the same way it was extended to us, that we might also become peacemakers in this world and that hearts and lives may be changed. It is my prayer that we would all know that change and begin to think about *it* this Christmas.