



Sunday 14th November 2021:

Shalom and the Coming of Jesus

1. Readings:

Genesis 12:1-3

'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
3 I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

Isaiah 9:6,7 NIV

"And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (*Shalom*).
7 Of the greatness of his government and peace (*Shalom*)
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and for ever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this"

2. Questions:

- a) (Easy one to start with!) What form of greeting are you currently using as we recover from the pandemic? Has the pandemic prompted you to consider greeting people in a different way in the future?

- b) Individualism is the dominant cultural norm in this country. As Christian brothers and sisters we are to demonstrate something different, God's Shalom. How might we live in a counter cultural way that demonstrates God's love and shalom for all people? In what ways can we ensure that we maintain this approach and avoid falling into individualistic thinking?
- c) The passage read from Isaiah 9:6,7 describes the names of the coming Messiah and His Kingdom. Consider the words of verse 7 and particularly note the community values that characterise the Kingdom.
- d) We can readily recognise that we need to act on the challenge of the Apostle Peter when he says; *'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.'* 1 Peter 3:15 Discuss how ready you are to do this, what you might say upon different encounters, neighbour, family member, friend or stranger. Then consider how your group, SG or MC is bearing witness to God's Shalom for all people? Does your group have a missional focus, does the group need to review / confirm its focus?
- e) In many ways, the pandemic has mitigated against the building of community life. At this time, in what ways can your group rebuild community life?

3. Prayer:

In the message, Andrew expressed thanks to all group leaders who have worked to help and support people through the pandemic. Please pray for your group leaders, first asking how they have found the experience of leading over the past 20 months and inviting them to share specific prayer needs. Then pray for them.

Pray for one another concerning our vulnerability to succumb to individualism in our society, turn to God, seek and receive His forgiveness and commit to working towards building community life and bearing witness to God's love for all people and the message of the gospel that is good news.

What is God calling your group to do at the present time? What is your vision for how your group needs to develop over the coming months/year. It's openness to receive new members (a number of 'new people' have joined the church over the past few months and are looking to join a small group or missional community), it's missional focus, the material that you might use in discipleship, it's pastoral care.

Share the words of the blessing that God gave to Moses in Numbers 6:24-26 and/or play a recording of the song, The Blessing' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp6aygmVzM4>

4. Text of the Sermon:

Shalom and the Coming of Jesus

The last church service held in this building before the pandemic was on Sunday 15th March last year. On that Sunday I was in the Hub with the Inclusion Missional Community leading an Inclusion Brunch.

The brunches are held once a month providing an opportunity for anyone to come along including anyone new to the church, Hub users, CAP clients, friends and family to spend time together in an informal atmosphere with food and conversation around a specific theme and with a short message sharing a Christian perspective on that theme.

As we began our Brunch, we had a lighthearted chat about how we might greet one another as we had heard that hand shaking was no longer a safe thing to do. We considered:

- Elbow greeting

- Ankle greeting for the agile!
- Namaste – Indian greeting
- For the Star Tek fans, the Vulcan Salute

We had a bit of fun with it. Of course, it was a way of adapting to something so strange, the idea that we wouldn't be able to greet everyone the way we normally did. Little did we realise that our form of greeting over future months was going to be via a video call or phone call, and not in person.

Inclusion Brunches restarted last month and we will be meeting again next Sunday morning at 10.30am in the Hub Café. So, if you are new to the church, do come along, it's a great way to get to know one another. Have a chat with me afterwards if you would like to know more.

This morning we are going to look at a word that is the Hebrew word for greeting used by the people of Israel in the Old Testament and still widely used today, **'Shalom'**. It is a greeting, as people meet each other in the street or elsewhere they greet one another with the word Shalom.

In our western culture, how do we greet one another? What term do you use? If we want to be formal or traditional, we might say 'Good morning', 'good afternoon', 'good evening' or less formal we might say 'Hello' or 'Hi', or if you pick up the American way you might simply say 'Hey'. (I have watched a couple of Netflix series recently and Hey seems to be the best that they can come up with even between people who know and care for one another very much.) The truth is that there is not much more to our common greetings, whichever one you use, than acknowledgement that we have encountered someone else on our journey!

So, what about this Hebrew word Shalom, does that say anything more than Hi or Hello? Well, it is used as a social greeting, but its use communicates so much more.

Our Bibles translate the word **Shalom as 'peace'** and that does express something of its meaning. But, Shalom is used over 200 times in the OT and has many meanings. Peace is the closest in English but Shalom also means **Completeness, wholeness, wellbeing and joy**. It is used to ask about the **welfare** of another, to describe someone being **in harmony** with someone else, it may also refer to **material prosperity** or **physical safety** and **spiritual wellbeing**. It is therefore much more than a greeting between two or more people, it is a blessing, it is the expression of concern for the wellbeing of others, for peace upon them and the whole community. **A Community of Shalom.**

In the book 'We not Me' by Andy Matheson that has inspired this series of messages, he refers to the story of Joseph by way of illustration of the different ways that the word Shalom was used in everyday language. The story is in Genesis 37 onwards. He says:

Once Joseph is seen as favoured by his father and is given the coat of many colours, the Bible says that his brothers...could not speak a kind word to him, literally, 'his brothers could not speak shalom to him'. A few verses later, when Joseph's father sends him off to find out how his brothers are, he says, 'Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks', literally, 'Go and see the shalom of your brothers and the shalom of the flock.' Seek after their wellbeing.

A few chapters later when Joseph is in Egypt and the brothers return, having discovered silver in their sacks of grain, Joseph says to them, 'It's alright...don't be afraid, literally, Shalom to you, do not be afraid.'

One of the problems of translating Shalom into the English the word for peace is the conclusion that we can come to that peace simply means the opposite of hostility, that hostility has ended and now there is calm, there is peace. But Shalom is not used in that way, **shalom is the presence of health, wholeness, joy and prosperity**. The presence of good things.

The greeting of Shalom is a greeting that reminded the people that they had been called to be part of a bigger story, God's story for the wellbeing of all people. In Genesis 12: 1-3, we read of the covenant that God made with Abram.

The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

² 'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

A nation, a community of God's people for the blessing of others and one day for the restoration of all people to God. To be a 'model community', a light to the world.

Nothing here that is individualistic, it is all about a people living together in community, a community of Shalom. A nation bearing witness to God's presence and characterised by justice, peace and equity. *'I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people.'* Lev 26:12
There will be provision for you, wholeness, safety and wellbeing.

Even in Exile in Babylon, where they were living in a land not their own, they were to be a blessing to those around them. They receive the word of the prophet Jeremiah saying; Jeremiah 29:7 *'...seek the peace and prosperity (or welfare) of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'*

These words have inspired many today and in the past to work for the 'wellbeing of the city', of the town, village, community around them. It is a missional vision.

It was a reminder to the people of Israel that they were to be **salt and light to the world** a shining example, and that this would be made evident as they lived together in community.

Matheson puts it like this; *Shalom is not simply a spiritual word: it is also social. Intellectual, emotional and physical. It points to well-being in the whole of life because the whole of life is God's domain.'*

Jesus Prince of Peace.

Of course, the story of the people of Israel, the story of the OT points to the coming of God's Messiah, of Jesus Christ, God's Son. Who would bring justice and peace to all people.

We are about to enter Advent, the time of waiting for the coming of the Messiah that we celebrate at Christmas. And we will hear again the words that describe who the Messiah will be, he will be called *'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'* Isaiah 9:6 and as you may have summarized, the word for peace is the word Shalom. Jesus will bring Completeness, wholeness, wellbeing and joy to all people through Him. And the prophecy continues in verse 7 *'Of the greatness of his government and peace (Shalom) there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this'.*

There is so much in this verse about God's purposes, we don't have time to look at now but hear those words Justice, Righteousness and Peace and reflect on them, what is God saying to us about these things?

When the people of Israel spoke Shalom over one another what they were also expressing '**God's Messianic hope of an age to come**'. They had the story of God's purpose for humankind in the prophecies that they had been given and it was embodied within the greeting that they used on a daily basis, Shalom, God's peace, God's reign for the prosperity and wellbeing of all people.

In the NT, the word for peace in the Greek is *Eirene*. We hear it in the words spoken by the Angel and the heavenly host alongside him as they spoke to the Shepherd in the field at the announcement of the birth of Jesus, "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth Shalom (peace) to those on whom his favour rests.*" Luke 2:14

God is with us, in Jesus he has come, and God's purposes are made plain through Him, that all people can experience wholeness, healing, freedom, life in all it's fullness, as God intended it to be. And this is to be enjoyed in community, in relationship with one another, that is where the wholeness dwells. **We become in Christ, a Community of Shalom, a community of peace. Christ in the midst of us.**

Of course our witness of God's love and salvation as individuals is important, as the Apostle Peter said, *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have* 1 Peter 3:15 but there is something profound in the witness of those who love Jesus by the way they treat one another that is visible to those who are yet to discover the truth of God's love for them and the good news of the gospel. About the love that should mark the community of God's people, Jesus said; *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* John 13:35

This is why, here at ABC, have committed ourselves to the **forming of communities of peace** that reach out to others, to bear witness to God's love for others, communities of Mission.

We call them, for want of a better title, **Missional Communities**. Communities of **Discipleship** growing together in Christ, Communities of **Pastoral care** and support for one another, and Communities of **Mission**, reaching out to others with the good news of Jesus, expressed in many different ways.

Community life has been weakened through the pandemic. We haven't met together as we once did, social cohesion has been affected we have experienced disconnection. This cannot be the way forward for us, we need to recognise what has been lost, and for the sake of one another, to come together again and experience and value the life giving benefits of community life. The church is a body, of many parts and blessed with many different gifts, we are dependent upon one another, we know that all too well. Let us commit to reconnecting, rebuilding community.

We also battle against our western culture that mitigates against community. We live in a culture that proclaims the importance of the individual, what works for me above concern for the other, for community. It is Me first! This is not the gospel of Christ. We need to see it, be critical of it and do all that we can to counter it. We may have succumbed somewhat to our culture over the pandemic, it will take an act of will and recommitment to Jesus for us to counter it, to get back onto the right path again.

This past week I haven't been very well, I was fine until Monday evening then became very dizzy and nauseous. At first, I thought it could be food poisoning, I had reheated some food from the previous day but it wasn't that, it didn't clear after a day or so. The doctor diagnosed it as vertigo, a bit like the wooziness that you might get looking over a high cliff or building but continuous, all the time. (I am not saying this for your sympathy by the way but thank you all the same!) The doctor prescribed some tablets and I am beginning to feel better now but it is taking time to get back to normal! It is rather like the way that the pandemic has impacted us. It has sent us off balance and we need to re-establish our equilibrium. It isn't something that we have done to ourselves, it hasn't been a wilful act to disconnect from one another, we have been a victim of it but it is important that we now rebalance and reconnect in community.

Thank you to the leaders of MC's and SG's who have worked hard to maintain community through these difficult times, thank you and bless you for all that you have done.

You may have been part of a MC or SG previously and have lost connection, can I encourage you to reconnect with your group or with another group if that is appropriate for you at this time. There are also many people in the church who are very able to lead a group. This is a good time to do that, to step out in faith, to gather others around you and to start a new group. It will be faith building for you and it will be an encouragement to others. Who or what is on your heart for God's Kingdom? What has God been preparing for you to do? Come and talk to Ash or myself it might be that we know others who share the same missional vision or that we know of people who want to join a group.

If you are new to the church, take a look at the church website under the tab, 'Communities'. The names of the leaders of groups are given and you can get in touch with them through the church office. If you live in the area of Oldfield Brow there is a group of people there who are blessing that part of Altrincham, if you are interested in Journaling there is a group who do that and invite others to join them, if you are a parent bringing up children, there is a Families Group, if you are a foster parent or have adopted children a group called Paddington's and so on...All these groups are seeking to reach out to others who share similar life experiences or stages of life with the love of Jesus.

I also extend the invite that I gave earlier to come along to Inclusion Brunch next Sunday morning in the Hub Café at 10.30am. We will share food together, so if you can bring a little something with you that would be great but come along anyway!

Of course, there are other ways that the community of faith can bear witness. Through the actions that we take together to bring hope and bless those around us. The work that we have been doing through the Hub clearly illustrates this. We can do so through or working together with other people of Faith, through church unity movements, locally through Hale Churches together, through churches in the Greater Manchester area, and through Christian charities and organisations here and around the world. God is working his purposes out in many different ways and different contexts, let us not be insular and isolated from our brothers and sisters who are working for the Kingdom of God, let us work together.

Finally,

Ash, after studying one of the letters of Paul, Philippians I think, decided to change all his responses at the end of his messages, emails etc to say '**Grace and Peace**'. Meaning, God's blessing upon you. God has brought you His peace His restoration, wholeness and wellbeing. In effect a shortened version of the priestly blessing that was given by God to Moses that was to be pronounced over the people of God. It is recorded in Numbers 6:24-26. Let me pronounce that same blessing over you now.

²⁴ *“The Lord bless you
and keep you;
²⁵ the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
²⁶ the Lord turn his face towards you
and give you (Shalom), His peace.”*

The Lord will give you peace.