

Discussion questions for small groups

Pure in heart

Starter (15 mins)

- In which situations do you find it necessary to wear a mask and put on a show, making yourself out to be someone different from who you are?
- Why is this peer-group pressure so important to you?

Main course (60 mins)

- What is Jesus commending in this beatitude?
- In which sections of the sermon on the mount is this underlined and illustrated?
- How important is personal integrity on your frontline, in your workplace or wherever God has placed you?
- Do you think we should expect a match-up of personal and public life from our political leaders?
- How can the church free itself from accusations of hypocrisy? Can you give examples?
- If God is 'looking into our hearts' when we worship, what does he hope to see?
- How can we match up our life with our lips?

Dessert (15 mins)

- Allow the Lord to search your heart to find the areas where you are tempted to wear a mask, to lack consistency of life and lips, and to have double standards.
- Ask for cleansing and forgiveness, and reach out to him to receive his healing touch.
- Pray to be filled with the Spirit so that your worship and your life may honour God with a glorious consistency, bringing honour to his name.

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LIVING WITH RECONCILIATORY LOVE

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

MATTHEW 5:9

Divided world

Looking at the social landscape of Western civilisation, it is not hard to see how divided we are in so many ways. Social class is still the major category of social division, despite the inadequacies of applying Marxist definitions now to the new world of international markets and global economies. Other factors are also very significant in fostering division: race, nationality, gender, religion, political persuasion, age, location, education, employment, mobility, access to technology, health and disability all contribute to differences of outlook and value systems, sometimes leading to conflict. Social divisions have close links to social inequality, because these divisions often indicate the degree to which people can access resources and opportunities. The 'under-classes' of migrant, prison and homeless communities are below the radar of mainstream society much of the time, except when there is an outbreak of violence or social disruption. While national and cultural identities can and should be celebrated, for example in the competitive rivalries of sport, these also often spill over into national rivalries, ethnic struggles and social conflict. Tragically, the end of the Cold War has ushered in a new era of wars centring on the Middle East, the Baltic States and the Far East.

The rise of a radical Islamic fundamentalism has been the most concerning aspect of international politics in the last 50 years. The two main expressions of this have been Al Qaeda and ISIS, who have a common ideological opposition to the West, but have very different approaches to waging jihad and inflicting violence. Al Qaeda's primary focus of opposition has always been the United States, whereas ISIS has waged war on 'apostate Shi'ite regimes' such as Syria and Iraq in an attempt to create a 'pure', radical Islamic state. Using social media and online propaganda, ISIS has recruited thousands of young jihadists from all over the world. In a speech in June 2013, the ISIS leader, Al-Baghdadi, is reported to have said:

Rise, oh lions of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and cure the frustration of the believers and attack the hateful Rafidah [Shi'ites], the criminal Nusayris, the Party of Satan [Hezbollah] and those who come from Qum, Najaf and Tehran. Show us from them blood and body parts and tear them apart, for we have known them when we have met them to be cowards. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant remains as long as we have a pulse or an eye that blinks.⁷⁶

We certainly live in a fragmented and broken world. It all seems a long way from John Lennon's idealistic optimism expressed in his famous song 'Imagine'. Here, he invites us to dream of a world where all the barriers that divide human beings, including religion, are broken down so there is nothing to kill or die for and 'the world will be as one', with people living in peace.⁷⁷

While not agreeing with all his ideas, Christians also have a vision for world peace, of reconciliation between warring factions and unity among the peoples of the world. It is there in the original covenantal promise to Abraham that through his seed 'all the nations will be blessed' (Genesis 12:2-3). It is there in the messianic prophecies of Isaiah about 'every warrior's boot used in battle... will be destined for burning' (Isaiah 9:5) and 'the wolf will live with the lamb' (Isaiah 11:6). It is there in the last chapter of the Bible, in the vision of the

New Jerusalem, where there is a tree of life by the river, and 'the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations' (Revelation 22:2). But how is this possible? Is this not similar to Lennon's idealistic dreaming?

The Prince of Peace

The peace of God is a much bigger concept in the Bible than 'feeling peaceful' or having 'peace of mind'. The Hebrew word is *shalom*, meaning wholeness, completeness and well-being, and in the Old Testament it is a key blessing from God through his covenant with Israel (Numbers 25:12). The blessing of *shalom* means a spiritual wholeness of a close relationship with God himself, as well as a social well-being whereby relationships with family and friends are restored and wholesome in the wider community. It results in an inner sense of well-being, knowing we are loved by God and those around us, and experiencing joy and purpose in our lives. If the fall of humanity, described in Genesis 3, caused a loss of relationship with God and neighbours, then *shalom* undoes the negative consequences and restores God's people to that place of spiritual wholeness and social well-being.

This is what God's people in the Old Testament longed for more than anything else, and they definitely experienced periods of *shalom* at various times: when they finally settled into the promised land (Joshua 21:43-45), when King Solomon had built the temple in Jerusalem and reigned over a period of peace and prosperity for Israel (2 Chronicles 5-9) and when the exiles in Babylon had finally returned to their land and rebuilt their city and temple in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 12:40-43). Yet it never seemed to last, and before long they were back into their old cycles of disobedience, disloyalty and idolatry. They broke the covenant, they worshipped other gods and they disobeyed God's laws and commandments, and so there were constant wars with the neighbouring nations and internal conflict and disharmony. They forfeited the blessing of *shalom*.

So it became a key element in the writings of the prophets that the hope of a coming messiah would usher in a new period of *shalom*, deeper and more permanent than ever before. Isaiah 9 is a classic example: the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light (v. 2); there is great rejoicing (v. 3); there is an end to warfare and subjection to foreign rulers (vv. 4–5) because the Messiah is born who is called ‘the Prince of Peace’ (v. 6); and there will be no end to his rule of peace (v. 7). This is a *shalom* that will last for ever.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that when the Messiah does come, the angels announce to the shepherds in the birth narratives: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests’ (Luke 2:14). Jesus’ parting gift to the disciples as he prepares to go to the cross is the gift of *shalom* (‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you’, John 14:27). And in many of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, the first thing that he says to his bewildered and frightened disciples is ‘Peace be with you’ (Luke 24:36).

The apostle Paul portrays *shalom* as being one of the main blessings of the gospel because the death and resurrection of Christ have enabled us to come back into relationship with God (Romans 5:1; Colossians 1:20) and also enjoy restored relationships with those around us (Galatians 3:26–29). The writer of the Hebrews describes the Lord as ‘the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep’ (Hebrews 13:20). The early church experienced wonderful times of *shalom* (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35; 9:31) and Christians are told to have their ‘feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace’ (Ephesians 6:15). One of the consequences of bringing everything to God in prayer, says Paul, is that ‘the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 4:7). Here is God’s gift of *shalom* being given in a deeper and more permanent way under the new covenant.

Peacemaking, therefore, is first and foremost a divine activity, through which God makes peace with humankind through the gift of his Son, and also brings peace to the world by breaking down the dividing walls of hostility between communities (Ephesians 2:14–18). Graham Cole, professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in *God the Peacemaker* (IVP, 2010), provides a deep reflection on Colossians 1:20, which says that God is reconciling all things in Christ. His thesis is that the greatest need in the world is *shalom*, and that God intends to make peace in the universe through a great plan of salvation focused on the cross of Christ. This means that peacemaking becomes one of the main priorities for the followers of Christ: we too try to help people to make their peace with God, and we try to bring peace and reconciliation between people, communities and nations who are divided. This brings us to the seventh beatitude.

Blessed are the peacemakers

In view of the above, it is clear that God himself is the great peacemaker, and that any concept of us being peacemakers must focus on what God has done in Christ to bring us peace. Also, seeing that one of the greatest blessings that will be enjoyed when the Messiah comes, according to Isaiah (chapters 9, 11 and 61), will be the wholeness and well-being of restored relationship with God, then to be peacemakers will involve calling people back into fellowship with their creator by announcing the gospel (Romans 10:14–15). This is the primary task of God’s people and it would have been impossible for Jesus not to have included it in his call for his followers to be peacemakers. By this measure, Dr Billy Graham, the late international evangelist, was arguably the greatest peacemaker of recent Christian history. He preached to hundreds of thousands of people in the second half of the 20th century and my own mother came to a personal faith in Christ after hearing him at Wembley in 1973. Speaking about this beatitude, he said:

Peace can be experienced only when we have received divine pardon – when we have been reconciled to God... 'There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked' (Isaiah 57:21). But through the blood of the cross, Christ has made peace with God for us and is himself our peace.⁷⁸

There is also the relational aspect of peacemaking towards other people that flows from this restored relationship with God: as Robert Guelich says, 'The peacemakers of [Matthew] 5:9 refer to those who, experiencing the *shalom* of God, become his agents establishing his peace in the world.'⁷⁹ Jesus would have been aware that the Zealots, the Jewish revolutionaries of his day, were wanting a violent overthrow of Roman rule in order to usher in the kingdom of God, and they believed that their willingness to take up arms to overcome oppression was a sign of their being 'true sons of God'. Not so, says Jesus: it is the peacemakers who are the true sons of God. This will be re-emphasised later in the sermon with teaching about turning the other cheek and loving your enemies (Matthew 5:38–48).

So, our call to peacemaking in the conflict areas of the world flows from the peacemaking of God through Christ. There is a divine logic here because, in the saving work of Christ, God is 'putting the world to rights', undoing the effects of the fall and healing the wounds of our hurting and broken world. This is the metanarrative, the big story of a God who 'so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son' (John 3:16). Put simply, God is reclaiming his world, and his followers are to join with him in that process.

This is not to say that others who are not Christians have no part in this process – in fact, when you look down the roll of the 'world's' greatest peacemakers, many of them are people of other faiths or no faith. Their contributions have been hugely significant: Mikhail Gorbachev, whose reforms in the Soviet Union led to the end of the Cold War, and was therefore awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990; Mahatma Gandhi, who led the non-violent movement of Indian independence; Lech Walesa, the leader of the Polish Solidarity

Movement, who was the main catalyst in ending communist rule in Poland and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983; Diana, Princess of Wales, who worked with many charities to get landmines banned, support those affected by the AIDS epidemic, and raise awareness of those suffering with bulimia and suicidal tendencies by speaking openly about her own experiences; Malala Yousafzai, the schoolgirl in Pakistan who survived an attack by the Taliban to champion universal access to education and who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013, the youngest person ever to be considered, for example. These show that there is a wider human longing for peace and reconciliation and, as creatures made in the image of God, anyone is able to reflect the nature of God, the great peacemaker. In that sense, peacemaking might be considered to be a 'creation' mandate, part of our human responsibility to be responsible stewards over the whole of creation.

And yet we have also seen that the biblical concept of *shalom* is also a 'salvation' mandate, given to the Israelites under the old covenant and given to Christians under the new covenant. And therefore it is heartening to see the names of many followers of Christ among those listed as the world's greatest peacemakers: Leo Tolstoy, the novelist who interpreted the ethical principles of Jesus in the sermon on the mount very literally, creating a non-violent philosophy of peacemaking, which later influenced Gandhi and Martin Luther King; Desmond Tutu, the Archbishop of Cape Town who campaigned against apartheid as well as for other humanitarian causes; Mother Teresa, the founder of the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, for her work with the destitute and dying, who put herself in the middle of gunfire to save 37 children in Beirut in 1982 and who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979; Pope John Paul II, who became Poland's first pope and touched the world by his gentle kindness; Maria Ida Giguient, who has worked for the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and has devoted over two decades to bringing peace to Mindanao and East Timor, continuing her peace-building efforts by training various international groups in overcoming violence.

The ministry of reconciliation

Two personal moments brought me close to two of the finest peacemakers in living memory, who both owed an allegiance to the Prince of Peace, from whom their inspiration and motivation flowed. The first moment was when my family was on holiday in the USA and we stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in the precise spot where Martin Luther King made his famous 'I have a dream' speech to 250,000 civil rights supporters on 28 August 1963.

Martin Luther King Jr was born in 1929, at his family home in Atlanta, Georgia. His grandfather was a Baptist preacher and his father was pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, and King himself became pastor of a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama, having obtained a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Crozer Theological Seminary in 1951, and then his Doctor of Philosophy from Boston University in 1955. It was while at seminary that he became acquainted with Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent social protest, and, following a trip to India in 1959, he became convinced that non-violent resistance was the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.

Following a black bus boycott, King gained a national reputation as the leader of the civil rights movement in America and became a national hero. His goal was to bring to an end the system of segregation in every aspect of public life – in the workplace, in shops, on public transport, at public toilets and drinking fountains, and such like. He was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts before his untimely death, by assassination, in 1968 at the age of 39.

This is a small section of the speech that he made on that day, and standing there myself brought home the challenge of being a peacemaker wherever God calls me. It is worth noting how his words are infused with Christian vocabulary and biblical concepts, showing where his roots lay. The biblical quotation is from Isaiah

40:4-5, which we have seen is one of the key Bible texts that form the backdrop for the beatitudes:

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of 'interposition' and 'nullification' – one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day...

When we allow freedom to ring – when we let it ring from every city and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'⁸⁰

The other personal moment was a family trip to Cape Town in 2016, when we visited Robben Island and I stood in the doorway of the tiny cell where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for the first 18 years

of his 27 years in jail. The prison had formerly been a leper colony off the coast of Cape Town, and his cell was without a bed or plumbing. He was forced to do hard labour in a lime quarry and, as a black political prisoner, he received scantier rations and fewer privileges than other inmates.

He was raised and schooled as a Methodist, an experience he fondly remembered. In school, Mandela studied law and became one of South Africa's first black lawyers. In the 1950s, he was elected leader of the youth wing of the African National Congress (ANC), and was involved in peaceful protests. However, when these protests were met with intimidation and violence from the government, Mandela organised a secret military movement, which led to a government ban on the ANC and to his subsequent imprisonment.

Although he was sentenced to life in prison, he was released early when the ANC became legal again. Subsequently, he became the first black and democratically elected president of South Africa from 1994-99. He did everything in his power to heal the wounds of the apartheid years and work with the former white minority. Mandela became a global symbol of reconciliation and peace and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 (jointly with former president F.W. de Klerk) for peacefully dismantling the apartheid regime and laying the foundation for democracy.

Mandela was a committed Christian who chose to be quiet and retiring about his faith in public, for fear of using religion as a political tool as the apartheid regime had done. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Abacus, 1994), he talked of his early experiences with Christianity, praising the way it engaged with the society: 'The church was as concerned with this world as the next: I saw that virtually all of the achievements of Africans seemed to have come about through the missionary work of the church.'⁸¹ At a religious conference in 1999, he said: 'Without the church, without religious institutions, I would never have been here today... Religion was one of the motivating factors in everything we

did.' The president of the South African Council of Churches, Bishop Johannes Seoka, said of him: 'He was a man of great faith - he believed in God - but he was bigger than one denomination, even though he was a Methodist.'⁸²

Upon his release from prison, Mandela took opportunities to speak at several Christian gatherings. At one of these, the Zionist Christian Church's Easter Conferences in 1994, he spelled out the links between Christ and the work of reconciliation and peacemaking, beginning his speech with a reading of the beatitudes:

Easter is a joyful festival! It is a celebration because it is indeed a festival of hope! Easter marks the renewal life! The triumph of the light of truth over the darkness of falsehood! Easter is a festival of human solidarity, because it celebrates the fulfilment of the Good News! The Good News borne by our risen Messiah who chose not one race, who chose not one country, who chose not one language, who chose not one tribe, who chose all of humankind!

We pray with you for the blessings of human solidarity, because there are so many who wish to divide us! We pray with you for the blessings of reconciliation among all the people of South Africa!

We pray with you so that the blessings of peace may descend upon South Africa like a torrent! We pray with you that the blessings of love may flow like a mighty stream!⁸³

Following the legacy of King and Mandela, there are many excellent and thought-provoking guides to the ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking. One example would be *Reconciling All Things: A Christian vision for justice, peace and healing* by Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice (IVP, November 2008), who were, at the time of writing, co-directors of the Centre for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School, North Carolina. Believing that the church has not

always fulfilled its calling to facilitate reconciliation in the world, they offer:

... a comprehensive vision for reconciliation that is biblical, transformative, holistic and global. They... bring solid, theological reflection to bear on the work of reconciling individuals, groups and societies. They recover distinctively Christian practices that will help the church be both a sign and an agent of God's reconciling love in the fragmented world of the 21st century.⁸⁴

Another would be James O'Dea in his book *Cultivating Peace: Becoming a 21st-century peace ambassador* (Shift Books, May 2012), in which he explores in depth the mission of building a global culture of peace. Although not writing from a specifically Christian point of view, he goes beyond techniques of conflict resolution to provide a holistic approach to peace work, covering the cultural, spiritual and scientific dimensions, and is helpful 'even for those who have never considered themselves peacebuilders'.⁸⁵

It goes without saying that, for us to be effective peacemakers in the world, we must be at peace among ourselves within the Christian community. We need to repent of entrenched divisions and our tendency to divide over secondary issues and remember how Jesus prayed his heart out for unity among his followers in his high priestly prayer recorded in John 17. It must be a principled unity around the truth of God's word (v. 17) and we must all be able to submit to the authority of scripture as our rule and guide for Christian life and belief. But this must not be an excuse for us to separate ourselves from other believers over trivial doctrinal differences, but instead practise the saying that appeared for the first time in Germany around 1627 among peaceful church leaders of the Lutheran and German Reformed churches, and then found a hearty welcome among moderate divines in England: 'In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity.'⁸⁶

Pete Grieg, pastor and founder of the 24-7 Prayer movement, wrote an impassioned plea to the UK church in November 2016, saying:

We find ourselves, at a time of European fragmentation, on the eve of the Reformation's 500th anniversary, coming together in unity from many nations and denominations to pray for the re-evangelisation of the continent. Perhaps it's time for Europe to rediscover its identity by remembering where it came from. We are nations forged by the fires of the gospel: the crucible of Christianity for a millennium.

He then cites the MORI poll which showed the church to be, positively, the most socially and culturally diverse community in the UK. He adds:

With multiculturalism failing and protectionism proliferating, it is fantastic news that the church can stand as a prophetic example of reconciliation between different cultural, political and socio-economic identities.⁸⁷

Personal reflection

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God

- Am I a peacemaker? Do I bring peace to different sides?
- How do I behave when there are conflicts of opinion or conflicts of interest?
- Do I strive always to report only good things, positive words, and strive to let evil things, gossip and whatever might sow dissension, fall on deaf ears?
- Is the peace of God in my heart? If not, why not?

Prayerful response

Use the famous prayer attributed to St Francis of Assisi, who was the founder of the Franciscan Monastic Order in the 13th century, and who went on preaching tours wearing a rough grey tunic with a cord round his waist, and greeted people with the simple words: 'God give you peace':

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
 Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
 Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.
 Where there is discord, let me bring union.
 Where there is error, let me bring truth.
 Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
 Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
 Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
 Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.

O Master, let me not seek as much
 to be consoled as to console,
 to be understood as to understand,
 to be loved as to love,
 for it is in giving that one receives,
 it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
 it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
 it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.⁸⁸

Discussion questions for small groups

Peacemakers

Starter (15 mins)

- What areas of conflict in the world are you most concerned about? Say why you are concerned, explaining some of the issues behind the conflict.

Main course (60 mins)

- What does Jesus have in mind when he announces a blessing on the peacemakers, and why are they called 'children of God'?
- Can you explain how Christ's death makes peace between us and God and reconciles all things to himself (Colossians 1:19)? Have a try.
- Christ also breaks down the wall of hostility between people who have been divided (Ephesians 2:14–15). Have you experienced this? If so, share your examples.
- Why is there so much division in the church worldwide if we are all united in Christ, and how can we be proactive in 'maintaining the unity of the Spirit' (Ephesians 4:3–4)?
- Do you have unresolved conflicts and divisions in your own life, family or workplace? How could you be a peacemaker in these areas?
- What practical steps could you as a group take to bring peace to a troubled area of the world, perhaps in one of the areas mentioned at the discussion starter?

Dessert (15 mins)

- Praise and thank the Lord for the peace he has brought into your life through the saving work of Christ.
- Using phrases from Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17, pray for a deeper sense of unity and cooperation between Christians in your locality and across the world, and for the healing of ancient divisions.
- Ask the Lord to use you to bring peace and reconciliation to a troubled area of conflict that you know about.