

## Isaiah's Vision

By Charmila Ireland

In the idyllic countryside surrounding the Vimy Ridge National War Memorial there are cemeteries. They're beautiful and peaceful. They make your heart hurt and your soul weep. Even the most stoic can't help but feel the pain, the sadness that comes from endless rows, from endless names, from 1 or 2 or 16 names to a stone, from endless families destroyed, from cemetery after cemetery after cemetery. They dot the country side of northern France, a grim reminder of the cost of war. They are too numerous to count.

The Vimy Ridge Memorial, has 11,285 names carved onto its base on the sides. They are the names of all of the Canadian soldiers who were killed in WWI and whose bodies were never found and identified. Vimy is arguably the most beautiful and moving war memorial in France. The names of all of those missing soldiers are topped by two soaring pillars and a series of statues. Atop the two pillars, supported by the names of all of those dead soldiers, is The Chorus. There is Hope, Charity, Faith, Truth, Knowledge, Honour, and above all, Peace and Justice. Peace and Justice. What a world we live in where peace and justice are supposedly bought with the lives of 67,000 Canadian dead in 4 years. Peace and Justice. The War to End All Wars. Endless rows of crosses and names. And World War Two only 21 years later. Are peace and justice myths?

The prophet Isaiah didn't think so. In Isaiah 2:1-5 he gives the most beautiful vision of the future. "In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. What would the world today look like if all wars ceased? How much more attention could be given to education, to art, to healthcare? To caring for all of God's creation? Peace and justice would reign.

And yet, if you go home and turn on the news you will hear of more than two million Syrian refugees, over 120,000 killed. Of bombings in Pakistan. Of tension between Israel and Iran. Of death, destruction and war. Isaiah, a prophet speaking on behalf of God, saw a day when all war would be no more. Is that idealistic? Yes! Will it happen in our lifetime? Maybe, indeed probably, not. Does that mean we shouldn't try? Definitely not! As Gandhi said, "Be the change that you wish to see in the world." So, let us look closer at Isaiah's vision.

Let's start with verse three. It says "*Many peoples* shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways...'" Acceptance is key to peace. *Many people* will come to learn. They should not be rejected or turned away because they're different. Peace is only possible when people work together, when they see the value in their opponents. Think of the propaganda of WWII, the endless comparisons of Jewish people to rats and vermin, the reduction of people to less than human status. When your "enemy" isn't human, it's okay to kill them. But when people are accepted, when they work and learn together, when they have a face and a name, killing them becomes much harder. Peace becomes easier. In the world today we already see recognition of this: universities, governments, charities, and churches all encourage exchanges. They lead to greater cross-cultural understanding and closer ties. Isaiah envisions a place where many people are accepted. Perhaps at the house of the God of Jacob, people find acceptance and make friendships that will bind their nations together.

The next key is something fundamental: education. Isaiah speaks of God teaching God's ways, and instruction going forth out of Zion. Education allows you to see the world in new ways, make sense of events around you, and look at issues from other people's perspectives. Peace requires people to see the situation from their opponent's perspective, to compromise. It often requires creativity and innovation. It requires dedication and leadership. Education can help foster all of this. There has been much well deserved attention lately to the issue of girls' education. Increased female education increases household incomes and the national economy, decreases infant mortality, forced marriages and the birthrate. This all has knock-on effects, protecting the environment, reducing extreme poverty, increasing freedoms and human rights. All from just a few years in school. It's no wonder that Isaiah acknowledges education as part of the foundation for a future of peace.

Isaiah also alludes to yet another element to peace: hard work. Changing swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks would take a lot of effort. It doesn't just magically happen overnight. Somebody has to physically shape an object of war and destruction into an object of agriculture, growth and creation. Furthermore, farming itself is no picnic. It's a lot of early mornings, late nights, back breaking labour and few holidays. It frequently goes unacknowledged and is rarely highly compensated, despite how vital it is. Peace is a lot like that. Those that work for peace toil within a glacially slow moving system that only occasionally changes and acknowledges or rewards their efforts. Results can be hard to measure and compensation is rarely significant.

Perhaps they can take comfort in Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." And those peacemakers will be needed. Isaiah does not promise a world with no disputes, but instead one where God "will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many people." There will still be problems and conflict. It's just that now those conflicts are settled without violence. So blessed are the peacemakers, because they will always be needed.

The problem with creating a world without war is that destroying is easier. Picture New Orleans, ravaged by a hurricane in only a day and still being rebuilt. Picture Hiroshima or Nagasaki, destroyed in the blink of an eye. Or the environment, tainted for decades because of a single oil spill. It's a lot easier to shoot a gun or drop a bomb than it is to find common ground with your enemy, lay the bricks to build a school, or plow a field. But in the end, what does war give us? Dead men, women and children. Broken families and communities. Unusable roads and fields, destroyed schools and hospitals. Nothing of value. What does peace bring? Opportunities for education and better living standards. Security and safety. Dignity and human rights. I know which one I would rather have. The rest of the world knows too.

Fortunately, these voices are starting to be heard. Consider that when WWI came around, more people initially signed up than the government could train. Or WWII, when only one man voted in Parliament against joining. Now consider the War in Iraq: huge numbers of Canadian's signed petitions, called and wrote to their MPs, and demonstrated against joining. Canada was out. This wasn't apathy or unconcern about the situation in another country, it was a recognition that fighting for peace and justice was contradictory and usually ineffective. Most world leaders are now in a position that, when they want to go to war, they need to make a convincing case for the necessity to their people. This might not seem very important, but if you really think about it, it's monumental. War used to be a tool, a matter of course. Protesting war used to be considered essentially traitorous. It used to basically ensure a popularity boost for the president or prime minister. Now, it's a last resort. It's something that you have to explain. You have to convince people that it's needed. How much longer will it take before the whole idea is rejected? How long before Isaiah's vision comes about? Who knows. I'm hopeful, perhaps naively so, that it will be in my lifetime.

But it will be work. It is creation, instead of destruction. It is education and acceptance, instead of hatred. It is putting the needs of others ahead of your own. It is loving your neighbour as yourself and turning the other cheek. It may seem impossible. But today we remember. We remember all the men, women and families that have been destroyed by war. All the homes, roads, bridges, art, schools, hospitals, churches, fields and orchards, burned or turned to rubble. We remember the cost of war. And suddenly, peace seems like a viable option. Peace seems like the most beautiful thing in the world. It looks like sons returning home to hug their mothers, like girls sitting in a classroom. It sounds like church bells ringing instead of air raid sirens. It tastes like olives from Syria or grapes from Afghanistan. It smells like a fresh breeze, blowing away the smoke of war and death. It feels like hard work that makes you fall into bed at the end of the day, exhausted but content. It is worth it. So remember to do your part to spread peace in your family, community and beyond. Remember that the world can change. Be the change that you want to see in the world, for blessed are the peacemakers who will help bring about Isaiah's vision.