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# House of Peace—The Greater Splendor<sup>1</sup>

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Trying to make peace can be a messy affair. It takes a great deal of courage and understanding of issues. The current reports about the work of the Christian Peacemaker Teams in Haiti and Hebron are a good case in point.<sup>2</sup> Making peace with a quarrelsome neighbour can take years, sometimes generations! As they say, "Good fences make good neighbours!" We always deal with dynamics of personality, of community rules and a host of unknown factors in the attempts to make peace.

The Persian appointed governor Zerubbabel and the High Priest Joshua, were viewing the ruins of the Jerusalem Temple on the exiles' return to their homeland—some 500 years before the birth of Christ. They saw what a mess had been made by their former captors. Now on return, under the pass given them by the Persian King Darius, they heard the despair in the cries of their people at the loss of the most holy place... a symbol of splendor fallen, destroyed. The basic stone structure probably still remained. But the precious metals and the valuables had all been stripped.

Viewing the ruins of the old Jerusalem temple in 520 B.C. could be analogous to viewing the ruins of a life, of a society or culture, of a world of people: lives in which people have made choices, good and bad, or where circumstances have been dramatically altered, perhaps through no direct fault of one's own, knowingly or unknowingly playing into the hands of the former times, the former powers, the former values. Visiting the deserted and forlorn house that was once a home, reminds one that here were prayers said, experiences endured or enjoyed, where sin took living shape, and where love was once alive.

Into this situation comes a word from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. God's representatives to the people are speaking. Take courage...It will be rebuilt...The second temple will be even more glorious than the first...a greater splendor.... "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of Hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of Hosts" (Haggai 2:9, NRSV). The Jerusalem temple, a house of peace. Given the present circumstances in the Middle East, and in Palestine in particular, and for that matter, in the world in general, one is not encouraged in the faith of that promise!

But one must consider how the idea of the House of God, the Temple, came to be seen in later times. At one time, even in our country, or in Europe, grand cathedrals have been built. One marvels at their beauty. But is the beauty of art, architecture and material sufficient for the reign of God? "God does not live in temples made with hands" declares the Good News (Acts 7:48; 17:24). "Are you not the temple of the living God?" asks and declares the apostle Paul to his people in the congregation at Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16). "Don't destroy the temple of God and you are that temple."

In another way, the divine Presence of God is itself seen as the temple. "I saw no temple in the city [of God]," declared John, "for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb" (Revelation 21:22).

So we have observed a transformation. The temples of stone, wood and precious metals, the visual ideas shaped in earthen material, become now a people, a community, a family, a home, or if you will, a house. The people of God, seeking God's truth and embodying that Truth in their life and work, are the temple of God. Indeed, God is the One in whom the idea of temple finally comes to rest. Here, in the Presence, we finally arrive at the cosmic, the personal, sanctuary. Here we finally arrive at home.

How has this transformation taken place? Through the work of Jesus of Nazareth. The Jew from Nazareth. Who refused to bow to the powers of his time. Whose faith was directed towards the temple as the house of peace. Remember how he wept over the city of Jerusalem and its temple. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen

gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See your house has left you..." (Luke 13:33). You would not let yourselves be reshaped into a house of peace, a community of peace-making. A house for ALL the peoples of the world. A house where ALL could worship. A house where all would live in peace. A house of much greater splendor than that even of the Second Temple, rebuilt on the ruins of the old. See, Jesus said to his followers, not one stone shall remain on another... a temple with a greater splendor will be built.

The current draft confession of faith in a Mennonite perspective reads:

We believe that Jesus Christ is our peace, and in him the foundation for a new creation has been laid. Through his death and resurrection, he has reconciled us to God and given the church the ministry of reconciliation in the world. Led by the Holy Spirit, we follow Christ in the way of peace, doing justice, and practising nonresistance in the face of violence and warfare.<sup>3</sup>

Peace is the will of God for all people, all humanity. War and injustice are not the will of God for any one person or people. This will of God for peace is shown us in Jesus. I won't forget how one of my membership class persons put it: they became convinced of the scriptural "Way of Peace" when they realized how hard it was to imagine Jesus in a green beret! Can YOU imagine it? For all the rationalizing we do about our decisions or positions, that is one you can't argue...

Our draft confession summarizes further:

Jesus taught us to love enemies; he forgave wrongdoers; he called for right relationships in place of injustice. When threatened with violence and death, he chose not to resist, but suffered, died, and was resurrected, thus overcoming hostility and death. Giving his life once for all, he accomplished our peace with God, even while we were the enemies of God, and removed the dominion of death.<sup>4</sup>

No soldier who has died in war has made what is euphemistically called the "supreme sacrifice". They died as part of a killing organism in deadly human combat. Or they died at the hands of a killing organism in deadly human combat. But that is not understood in our society. Yes, they may have died in war. Yes, they must be respected for the decisions they made to enter into the war effort. Yes, their deaths are an incredible loss to their families, and to our societies. Yes, they were brave, perhaps, even while fighting in fear. But they did not

make the supreme sacrifice. That term must be reserved for the one who died, not in war, but on a cross. And his IS a supreme sacrifice because of the motive of his dying: not to kill, but to redeem the enemy. To build that House of Peace. And he, only, has the credentials to say to all of his followers,

You have heard that it was said, love your neighbour and hate your enemy. [That is normal and that is what you have always been taught.] But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you...so that you may be [become?] the children of your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:43-45).

And, beloved, THAT is the house of peace, the greater splendor. And THAT House is still being built. The foundation has been laid, which is Jesus Christ. But you and I are the stones that are being built into this house (1 Peter 2:5):

He came and proclaimed peace... so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows INTO A HOLY TEMPLE IN THE LORD; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:17-22, emphasis mine).

And, continues Paul, THAT is the reason that I am a prisoner (Ephesians 3:1).

Take seriously the view in the Gospels, in Luke and in Acts and the letters of Paul, that the "temple" is now, in Christ, in the Kingdom of God, the people of God. A community, a much greater splendor than that of the old, the brick and mortar. This congregation, this community, worships here in this building, that community worships there in that building, but the real building is in you and among others. The greater splendor is not that of the beauty of this place, including our beloved pipe organ! But it is the temple of the heart: "the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious" (1 Peter 3:4, RSV). It is with this gentle and quiet spirit that we, as God's people, are to adorn ourselves.

Our sister in Christ, N. N., who died on Friday and will be buried tomorrow, is one of those spirits. In her life story she writes about the terrible times of October 1919, in which her home village in the Ukraine was torn asunder and burned,

and many of her friends and acquaintances murdered. She writes about fleeing the raiders with her fiancée and a number of others, hiding in cornfields and the deep plowed furrows, running at night for safety. And upon return a few days later surveying the desolation with such deep sadness and still in the midst of those years of turmoil, to take a brief time out to celebrate her marriage, in the midst of all that uncertainty and all that grief, and to remain hopeful, experiencing in that uncertain time the birth of her two daughters, then taking another risk of leaving her homeland to come and start life anew, longing now, in her last days, to journey on to the next phrase of life. And again, adorned with that "imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Peter 3:4). This is the spirit of Shalom; this is the holy Temple of the Lord. This is the Temple with the greater splendor!

This is also the "Spirit of Shalom" with which the Christian Peacemaker Teams have now, in this time, taken initiative to return to such places of terror, intentionally, with resolve, and with the faith that peace is the will God for all people. And they have placed themselves into the situations of risk, for the sake of that peace, as observers in the recent turmoil in Haiti, and in Hebron. This is indeed the house with greater splendor!

Yes, we need to respect the soldiers who died in World War I and II, and the Korean War. Our Waterloo member of Parliament, Andrew Telegdi, has sent us the list of names of persons from the Waterloo-Kitchener Region who died in these wars. There are 364 names. What tragedy! And where are the names of the others? The six million, the twenty-five million, and on, and on? And where is the Name of the One...and where are the "children of the resurrection"?

God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive. Here in this world we groan, and we yearn, and we pray and hope. And the living God builds that House of Peace, the one with the greater splendor, both here and hereafter, both on earth and in heaven.

The coming kingdom is a kingdom of shalom, of peace!  
AMEN.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This sermon was preached at the Waterloo Kitchener United Mennonite Church on Peace Sunday, 12 November 1995. It is based on the Common Lectionary readings for the day: Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; and Luke 20:27-38.

- <sup>2</sup> Christian Peacemaker Teams were organized by Mennonite and Brethren denominations in response to a call given at the 1984 Mennonite World Conference. The call was for the organization of a non-violent peacemaking force to enter into areas of active conflict as an alternative to armed force. For more information contact Christian Peacemaker Teams, 1821 W. Cullerton, Chicago, Illinois, USA 60608, Tel. 312-421-5513 or Fax 312-421-5762.
- <sup>3</sup> Draft of the new Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective. Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, no date, p. 35. This document is now fully revised, adopted and published as *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.