

Rest in Peace?

Peace is a word that sounds, well, peaceful. I think of quiet places, like a dark, starry night in a remote village in Papua New Guinea (PNG), or of reading and praying in my study. It is the opposite of anxiety or even warfare.

We lived in two separate villages in the Southern Highlands of PNG for over 15 years. There was often no peace: some clans had been fighting each other for years and their hatred ran deep. But there were also times of “peace” when opposing clans worked on projects together and had times of celebrations.

When translating the New Testament into two related languages, I worked with a team of men to try and find the best way to translate scripture—searching for the right “word”. There was no problem to find words of warfare—many men were named “Fight” and some had battle wounds they were proud to show me. But the idea of peace was more complex. It was always tentative, more like a truce or cease fire, where new problems could arise at any moment. (This may sound familiar!) One idea of peace between opposing parties was shown in the phrase “to trample upon,” meaning that the problem had been obliterated. It wasn’t of course, but the words were strong enough to reinforce the idea of perhaps a treaty. To support the commitment to peace, gifts were exchanged. You may be familiar with the book “Peace Child” by Don Richardson about how the Sawi people of (then) Irian Jaya formed peace bonds through an elaborate ceremony, culminating in the offering of a baby to appease an enemy tribe. Richardson used the analogy to the offering of Christ for our sins.

We read of peace offerings throughout the Old Testament: animals, grain, and food were offered by the priests as special gifts to the Lord to atone for their own sins and those of the people. The peace offering was an expression of thanksgiving, and it was in the context of particular ceremonies.

In the New Living Bible translation there are 362 references to “peace” and 85 to “peace offering,” and every book of the NT has passages about peace. When we turn to them, we find that most refer to a kind of “inner peace,” a peace that is difficult to understand. This kind of peace is quite different than peace between enemies, although there are similarities. There is a priest who officiates the peace, but it is Jesus and he does it once and for all.

The center of emotions in the East Kewa culture is the liver, not the heart as in English and Western cultures. When people are comforted their liver may “sleep” or “lie down,” such that they are at rest—their anxieties are “tamed.” The Kewa men suggested that this kind of peace is similar to comforting someone who has lost a friend or loved one, or to help one who has great anxieties. It is also the word used to domesticate a dog or any animal and in this sense is “taming” them.

Jesus informed his followers that the kind of peace he gives is not like that of the “world.” He informed his disciples to pronounce peace on any house they visited and then, in a seemingly

strange twist in the use of the word, he said that he did not come to bring peace to the world, but a “sword.” He didn’t want us to think that the world was going to be a peaceful place just because we follow him.

Nations of the world claim they want peace while many of them, at the same time, prepare for war. Peace is held up as an objective, but bombs are stockpiled “just in case” they are needed.

Today, around the world there is a longing for peace and tranquility in the “battle” against Covid-19. Behind the scenes, however, many nations are just as concerned about the potential of warfare. Anxiety and accusations frequent the media and peace and friendship seem unlikely. This is not a time of external peace.

However, and this is a major caveat, by means of repentance and forgiveness there can be peace. *“I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart because I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33).

Karl and Joice Franklin



Praying for peace