

Archbishop Justin writes for The Guardian about the possibility of peace and building a new world out of brokenness.Â



In the midst of the second world war, Lieutenant Kurt Reuber, a pastor and physician with the German army at Stalingrad, drew a Madonna which hung pinned to a mud wall outside the dugout. In the midst of the darkness, the brutality and the cruelty of war, he portrayed a mother protecting her child from the world. Around the margin are the words: "Licht, Leben, Liebe". In the depths of conflict and suffering that have occurred so often in the history of humanity (and still occur today), people have always imagined those possibilities: light, life and love.

Peace is something that human beings long for in our lives, our families, our communities, our country and our world. And yet we are living again in the shadow of war in Europe as Ukraine fights for its existence, hearing regular stories of the chaos, cruelty, suffering and destruction that characterises the effect of war on blameless people.

There is no shortage of political and cultural conflict and turmoil in this country and around the world. And all of us have experienced personal conflict with close friends or loved ones, relationships that are often deeply painful and can bear lasting scars. So why do we keep making the same mistakes, repeating these cycles of conflict at every level of our society?

The question of identity is core to any understanding of conflict. Identity can be inherited, it can be imposed but most of all, when it comes to conflict, identity is about our relationships with others. When we fall into the trap of defining ourselves by who we are not, or we attempt to forcefully define the identities of others, we set ourselves up for serious ruptures in the fabric of our relationships.

That doesn't mean that peace is unanimity, a shared conformist identity. No, peace is the ability to deal with discord by non-violent means. It is the transformation of violent conflict into non-violent disagreement.

In Christian thought, we have the concept of just war theory, which attempts to understand how conflict might sometimes be morally justifiable. But we have no equivalent "just peace" theory. We accept that peace doesn't need justification; we all know inherently that peace is good. The result is we think hard about how to fight, but not about often how to build alternatives to fighting "how to resolve the conflict and competition that are an inevitable part of being human.

The effort we are rightly making to support Ukraine in defending itself against aggression needs to be matched by efforts towards negotiation, dialogue, reconciliation and peace. You cannot have one without the other. Our challenge is to put in place the infrastructures of reconciliation and the architecture of peacebuilding that enable disagreement to happen robustly, but not violently.

In a culture that often expects instant results and gratification, this work does not happen overnight. There is no "kiss and make up" moment. More often, there is the gradual transformation "sometimes over generations" of enmity and hostility to respect and trust. I clearly remember a leader in Northern Ireland being interviewed on the radio in the early summer of 1998, a few weeks after the signing of the Good Friday agreement. He was asked whether reconciliation had been "achieved", and responded that the idea that something called reconciliation could be achieved in weeks, after 30 years of the Troubles and several centuries of bitterness, was absurd.

Deep wounds take a long time to become scars. Each of us carries our own pain, which makes it difficult to apologise and to forgive where we have wronged and been wronged. When we look towards reconciliation, we must also recognise "and have compassion for "our own conflicted and hurting hearts. Reconciliation is often risky and always costly "but it is less costly than the alternative.

Many years ago, I was in Burundi, just after the end of the civil war, facilitating a conference of rebel and government leaders. On the third day, a man in one part of the room pointed across the room to another. He said: "In the war he led a militia that killed 30,000 people. How can I forgive him? How can I be reconciled?" Just outside the window was the lake. I pointed out to it and asked: "If you go out in a boat on the lake and you fall out of the boat, what do you do?" He replied: "I swim."

I said: "If you don't swim what happens?" And he said "Well, I drown." I said, "Well, if you don't reconcile you will slaughter each other."

Dealing with conflict means dealing with complex people and complex situations. It will involve flawed people "sometimes acting in ways that are well meaning, sometimes acting in ways that are profoundly evil. Sometimes those involved will be extremely powerful, while others will be terribly vulnerable "as we see with the war in Ukraine. Reconciliation will always be complicated and flawed because we ourselves are complicated and flawed. It will often feel overwhelming, when we look at our entrenched histories of conflict and the sheer scale of violence around the world. We might wonder how we can begin to unpick the threads of the tangled mess we have made, and knit them together into new relationships.

But in all this, there is great hope. A friend of mine was a bishop who worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Much of his work was with survivors of the worst parts of humanity "refugees, child soldiers, victims of rape and severe violence. When I visited him I was overwhelmed by the suffering. "How do you deal with all this?" I asked him. He said: "We do what God gives us the resources to do, and the rest we leave."

In trying to build peace, we can only do what is possible. Often, it's far more difficult to take these small, concrete actions – to pick up the phone to an estranged child, or forgive a cruel word said to us by someone else. But that is what each of us can do to build a more peaceful world.

There are three transformational habits we can all cultivate to restore broken relationships, build connections across difference and bridge divides. First, be curious. When we encounter difference, or people we don't understand, do we truly hear their story and see the value they might bring? Do we come to discussions with humility to learn from those who aren't like us? Are we open to learning from people with whom we disagree? Second, be present. Can we fully encounter other people with authenticity? Can we bring our beliefs as well as our vulnerabilities to conversations?

Finally, reimagine. Peace requires a shift in our moral imagination, a transformation of our understanding of what could be possible. That's how we break out of repeating cycles of violence, the same mistakes – we have to be able to imagine a different world before it can become reality. Much of this reimagining happens collectively; it's with others that we can often envision and create something new.

This is a world that cries out: “Have mercy. We want peace.” As a Christian, I believe the presence of God in Jesus Christ cries out to each of us: “Have hope, here is peace.”

We are bound to make mistakes, to do bad things, to hurt others. That is the nature of being human. But there is always hope in the possibility of making whole what we have broken. It is not easy or straightforward – the repentance and forgiveness required for reconciliation means pain and sacrifice. But out of our brokenness can emerge a new world, one held together by the strength of new relationships with those we have chosen to know and love, regardless of our differences.

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