

Prayer for Peace, Hope and Justice

South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Mozambique, Cameroon, Somalia, Mexico, Colombia, Haiti, the DRC, Ethiopia, Ukraine, Gaza. If you try and research how many armed conflicts and wars there are currently in the world, you will find that there are as many as 110. These include what we traditionally know as war (Russia-Ukraine), but also civil war, ethnic war, terrorist insurgency, and drug wars.

Although every aspect of war is sickening, what I have found particularly distressing and heart-wrenching this week are the images of the children of war. About half the population of Gaza are children, and we have probably all seen pictures of injured or lifeless children caught in the middle of the violence in the Middle East. If the children aren't killed by gunfire, bomb explosions or airstrikes, there is every chance that a lack of food, water and access to healthcare will cause death. In Yemen, 2.2 million children under the age of 5 have been treated for malnutrition during the time of strife in that area. A child dies every 10 mins from hunger in Yemen. In Afghanistan, it is reported that 15.3 million people are malnourished, with many parents selling their children so that they no longer have to try and feed them.

Homes are lost during war, leading to the refugee crisis our world faces. At least half the refugees worldwide are children.

In war-torn Haiti, it is reported that 300 children have been kidnapped for financial or tactical gain, for sexual violence, or to recruit them as child soldiers to fight their wars. It is estimated that 225 million children and teenagers worldwide have had their education come to a standstill as a result of conflict. The long term effect of this will be devastating.

I went for a run a week ago, and along the route there was a group of people peacefully showing their support for our sisters and brothers in Palestine. Amongst the group were some children, holding out their hands for runners to touch as they ran by. I found it all incredibly moving, and found my hand lingering in one of the children's as I ran by, holding onto it for an extra second or 2, as the pain of children around the world flashed through my mind.

Let us pray.

Ever-loving God. As we are fed statistics, pictures and videos of the horror of the conflicts around the world, the barbed wire seems to be completely overwhelming. We do not know where or how to begin to pray. And so sometimes we just sit in silence with you, so so grateful that we have the gift of silence, and not the sound of gunfire reigning down all around us. The death and destruction in war-torn parts of your beautiful world are simply unimaginable to us, and so our words feel so small. We might wonder how they can make a difference. And yet we want to cry to you again, as we do each week, ever-loving parent - guard our children. Somehow, somehow, may they know the Presence of the great comforter. May they hear you whispering that you know each of their names, that you see them in their pain, and that you want them to be free. May they know that your deep presence will go with them, that you will give them rest, rest that is perhaps a mystery to us all. This morning we acknowledge and celebrate the precious belovedness of one of your

children through baptism in the safe space of this sanctuary. We pray for the miracle of your children on the battlefields somehow also knowing their precious belovedness.

Closer to home, we ask again that you guard our children - the children in our families and in our communities. Guard them from the deception that they are superior. Guard them from ever believing that they are "less than". Guard them from mistrusting others based on race, religion or ethnicity. Guard them from the temptation of believing that a solution is to oppress, intimidate, dominate, violate, hate...another. May they rise to be lovers of peace, compassion, gentleness, courage and justice.

Right now the barbed wire does seem overwhelming. God, it is difficult to see you in the chaos and the carnage. It might even be easier to stop looking and to turn away. But as Peter once asked, to whom else can we go? To whom else can we turn, other than the God of peace, and mercy, the God of compassion, and comfort, revealed to us in Jesus.

God of the silence - may the gunfire cease. The noise of the airstrikes be muted. The loud destruction of bombs be silenced. The agonising wailing of parents be hushed. The crying children be comforted and stilled. In the stillness, may your voice be heard. Out of the quiet, may your desperate invitation for your people to live in peace be heard. With hope, we pray that your light, symbolised by the candle, may rise in the darkness, and that our gloom will become like midday. Ever-loving God, may your hand linger forever in those of your children of war, as you hold them ever close.

And so we plead with you again together, as we pray
God bless Africa and all the world.
Guard our children
Guide our leaders
And give us peace.