

“Peace: Gift and Task”
Interfaith Prayer Service
UN International Day of Peace
By Patrick McInerney
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Introduction

Thank you for your kind introduction, and congratulations on this 23rd Interfaith Prayer Service for Peace, on the 45th United Nations International Day of Peace.

I affirm the Welcome to Country made earlier.

I have been asked to speak on “peace” – *shalom*, शान्ति (shānti), *nirvana* (in Sanskrit), *nibbana* (in Pali), ειρήνη (ee-re-na), *pax*, *salaam*.

Regrettably, I cannot fulfil this request, at least, not in the full resonance of those beautiful words.

It is not that I am ignorant, unprepared, or incompetent – at least, I hope not.

It’s not about knowledge, readiness, or ability.

It’s something deeper. It is existential.

None of us has experienced peace in its fullest sense.

Therefore, none of us can speak adequately of peace.

Not the Pope, the Mahatma, the Dalai Lama, the Chief Rabbi, or the Grand Imam.

None of them can speak of peace in the fullest sense of that word.

I will give two reasons: 1. evolution, and 2. our present context.

Evolution

Science teaches us that the world is evolving. Our world is not yet what it is destined to be. The future lies ahead. The fullness is not yet present.

Similarly, peace too is not yet here in its fullness. It is before us, in front of us, drawing us on, but we have not yet reached it. It lies beyond our grasp.

Consequently, by nature, we are ‘restless’ beings.

We are not content with our bodies. We want to lose weight, look better, be fitter. We hunger for food, thirst for drink, yearn for sexual fulfilment.

We are not content with our lives. We want better education, better jobs, better wages, better working hours, better homes, better retirement.

We are not happy with the world as it is. We yearn for justice, equality, peace.

In Christian terms, St Augustine named our existential discontent in his *Confessions*: “*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you*”.

Our religions name the hoped-for ultimate beatitude in various terms – salvation, heaven, *moksha*, *nirvana*, 天 (*tiān*), *Olam Ha-Ba* (the World to Come), *jannah* ...

The point is, we are not there yet. We haven’t arrived. We are pilgrims on the journey. Peace eludes us. It is a distant dream.

Our Present Context

Secondly, we are born into a world of violence.

- In Australia, “1 in 4 women (23% or 2.3 million) and 1 in 14 men (7.3% or 693,000) have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner since the age of 15.”¹
- In 2024 to 2025, on average, 1 woman was killed by an intimate partner every 11 days, and 1 man was killed every 26 days.²
- Yesterday's news reported 3 women killed in NSW in the previous 24 hours!³
- Across the world, from 1 December 2024 to 28 November 2025, there were 204,605 conflict events.⁴
- “These violent events resulted — conservatively — in over 240,000 deaths.”⁵

The Cost of Violence

- “In 2025, the global economic impact of violence was US\$21.8 trillion, equivalent to 10.5 per cent of global GDP, or US\$2,657 per person.”⁶

Here, I recall the words of President Dwight D Eisenhower:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”⁷

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) <https://www.aihw.gov.au/>

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) <https://www.aihw.gov.au/>

³ <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/post/three-nsw-women-killed-24-hours>

⁴ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) <https://acleddata.com/>

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⁶ Global Peace Index Report, 2026 <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Global-Peace-Index-2026-Report.pdf>

⁷ Address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Washington D.C., 16 April 1953

At this point, as a Christian, I am confronted by the words of Jesus Christ at the Last Judgement as recorded in the Gospel:

You that are accursed,
depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;
for I was hungry and you gave me no food,
I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not give me clothing,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”
(Mt 25: 41-43)

Religions Complicit in Violence

Religions are not immune or entirely innocent of this conflict and violence. When the absolute commitment proper to religion is used, abused, and misused for lesser sectarian, political, social, communal, or selfish ends, an infinite cause being forced into a finite vessel – which is a form of idolatry, worship of a false god – the inevitable outcome is an eruption of violence and conflict.

We see this in:

- the Crusades, pogroms, inquisitions, expulsions and colonisation carried out in the name of Christendom
- the disadvantages of minorities under *Hindutva* in India
- the expulsion of the Rohingya under Buddhist ideology in Myanmar
- the devastation of Gaza under “extremist Zionist ideology”
- and the mayhem and killings under the so-called “Islamic State” ideology in the Middle East and Africa, most recently displayed in all its ugly terror on Bondi Beach on 14 December 2025

These are all perversions of religion.

The violence, death, and destruction in our world result from the idolatrous worship of greed, wealth and power, at the cost of sacrificing the poor, the environment, and generations not yet born.

They all begin in some form of hate speech, and all too often, are condoned by our silence.

Religions, all religions, when followed authentically, are agents of peace, justice, reconciliation, and harmony in our world.

The Human Dilemma

As religious believers, we stand between the violence into which we are born, and the peace for which we yearn.

Hamlet named our human dilemma:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them. (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1)

Do we simply suffer wrongs, allowing ourselves to be crushed by violence, hatred, and war?

Or do we oppose wrongs, striving to eliminate them?

But in resisting evil, we often ‘exercise’ it, make it stronger, rather than ‘exorcise’ it, that is, drive it out.

Besides, fighting for peace is an oxymoron. No one ‘wins’ a war. In war, all lose. All is lost.

Doomed?

Born into a world of violence, and being incomplete works in progress in our evolutionary world—ever striving, never arriving—are we doomed to be forever restless, forever peace-less, never peaceful?

As a religious believer, my answer is a resounding no.

Peace is a Gift

The transcendent origin and end of the universe, variously named in our different religious traditions - the Beyond, the Ultimate Reality, *Brahman*, *Elohim*, God, Lord, *Allah* – does not abandon us to our desperate plight. The Holy One bestows peace as a gift, a grace. It is not complete, but it is a foretaste, a glimpse, an encouragement to keep on striving for the fullness of peace yet to come.

- This gift of peace can be experienced in nature:
 - in the stillness of a forest,
 - a stunning sunset,
 - the vastness of the sea,
 - the brilliant canopy of stars.
- It is experienced in the wonder of a newborn infant, or a sleeping child.
- It is made flesh in the covenant love of couples.
- It is learned in the school of family relationships.

- It is experienced in reconciliation, when we acknowledge our failures and receive pardon.
- “... it comes about, [whenever] hatred is overcome by love, revenge gives way to forgiveness, and discord is changed to mutual respect.”⁸

This peace is a gift. It is not won. It is not our achievement, the fruit of our labours. It is a gift that can only be received, not grasped or wrestled from another.

Peace is a Task

Does that mean that we are helpless beggars, forever pleading divine favour?

Not at all!

As the radical pacifist, Abraham Muste, said in the 1940s:

There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.⁹

If we want peace, we must practice peace. We must cultivate peace. We must nurture peace. We must grow peace. We must live peace.

Few of us will command a world stage to end the many wars and conflicts.

Let us begin with our own hearts. When we “suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”, do we become bitter, angry, and resentful? Or do we absorb it without retaliating, not imitating what we want to eliminate?

Let us begin with our marriages. When we experience small irritations and annoyances, do we allow them to fester and escalate, or do we resolve them before they overwhelm us?

Let us begin with our families – forgiving often, showing kindness, patience, gentleness, and compassion.

Let our peace then extend to friends, colleagues, and the wider community, ripples of peace that soften hearts, erode barriers, warm the cold, shine a light in the dark, and bring healing to our hurting world.

Conclusion

And when even these small gestures are beyond us, let us open our helplessness to the Holy One, who takes pity on our human frailty, and graciously bestows divine peace, “flowing like a river”, washing us, making us clean, refreshing us, giving us new life, everlasting peace.

Amen.

⁸ Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II

⁹ Dutch-born, North American clergyman and radical pacifist, Abraham Johannes Muste (1815 – 1967)