

## Pursuing the Peace of the City

by Laurence Steven

a sermon preached at Grace Mennonite Church, St. Catharines

October 20, 2024

On Saturday, October 5<sup>th</sup>, three members of the Grace Peace Group—Anita, Jan, and I—boarded the GO Bus at Fairview Mall to travel by bus and train to Toronto to participate with other peace-pursuing Mennonite Christians in a protest by Palestinian youth around the world marking the anniversary of the October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023 Hamas attack on Israel killing 1200 and the Israeli ongoing response which has killed 43000 in Gaza, thus far. We felt we needed to join the Mennonite Action group in prayer, hymn-singing, and fellowship for peace before marching over to join the larger action at Yonge-Dundas Square. On the weekend GO offers a one day pass for \$10.00—a real deal—so we thought we’d walk up Bay St. from Union Station to meet the Mennonite Action group at Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Trinity Square near the Eaton Centre.

On the trip *to Toronto*, during the experience *in Toronto*, both at Trinity Square and at Yonge-Dundas Square, and on the trip home *from Toronto*, we felt the God of peace was pursuing *us*, revealing himself in the most desolate, in the lost, in the vulnerable, in the others with whom we fellowshiped, and even in the very spaces in which we fellowshiped, in the heart of the city.

In retrospect we felt that God had granted us this adventure to Toronto as a way to understand what Jeremiah 29: 7 meant, where God tells the Jewish exiles in Babylon to “...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Our journey would help us understand more fully what exile means, and what prosperity means, in the light of Christ. I’ll break the journey up into six scenes.

## Scene 1: The Journey to Toronto

The bus arrived and there were no seats available. Fortunately, we three elderly folk managed to get on, but had to stand; others had to stay behind and wait an hour for the next bus.

After we got underway a teenage young woman gave up her seat to Anita, and shortly after, another teenage young woman gave her seat to Jan. Our faith in the youth of today was confirmed. It turned out that both young women were daughters of the woman Anita and Jan were now sitting beside. She may have nudged her daughters to do the right thing. She was also the “granny/auntie” to a seven year old little girl who was with them on the jaunt to Toronto.

Her “granny/auntie” was not really an aunt but a friend of the girl’s grandmother, who cared for the child a lot because her mom was not well. The granny/auntie was disabled and needed to use a walker with a seat. The little girl sat on the walker’s seat, snuggled up to her granny/auntie, and was soon chatting away to Jan and Anita about school and other seven year old things. She was missing front teeth and some others as well, had a hard time pronouncing some words, and was being given candy by the auntie.

When we transferred from the bus to the train at Burlington we lost sight of the little girl and her aunt, but a few minutes later, as we waited for the train, the two of them came trundling down the platform, smiling. The little girl just wanted to say goodbye to us, which she’d forgotten to do on the bus. As she walked away with her aunt we all felt a poignant pang of happy/sadness.

On September 29 Pastor Darrell preached about the “Community of the Vulnerable”, and referred to Mark 9: 35-37:

<sup>35</sup> Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” <sup>36</sup> He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> “Whoever welcomes one of these little

children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

As Darrell stressed, it is in and through vulnerability, both when we address that of others and as our own is addressed by others, that we find Jesus, and the peace that Jesus is.

## **Scene 2: On Bay Street**

We left Union Station and walked up Bay St. through the finance district past the Toronto-Dominion Centre, whose first tower, opened in 1967 was the tallest building in Canada at the time. I was 14 that year, and a Toronto friend took me to the 56<sup>th</sup> floor observation deck on the top of the tower where this country yokel gaped at the view, with mouth hanging open.

There are now six skyscrapers that comprise the TD Centre. It is the “largest commercial office complex in Canada” (Wikipedia). And yet, according to an Oct. 10<sup>th</sup> CBC story, the U.S. arm of the TD Bank Group, which represents 25% of TD’s business and is the 10<sup>th</sup> largest bank in the U.S., “is facing combined fines of more than \$3 billion US to be paid to U.S. regulators after pleading guilty to multiple charges, including conspiracy to violate the Bank Secrecy Act and commit money laundering.” In U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland’s words, “By making its services convenient for criminals, it became one.”

[<https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/td-bank-penalties-1.7348819>]

At street level beneath those awe-inspiring towers I saw a dishevelled man in his 30s or 40s approaching us, engaged in an intense argument with someone who wasn’t there. He looked our way as we passed and I momentarily locked eyes with him. Immediately he turned and started following us, screaming and swearing at us for a short while before being diverted by something else that attracted his vitriolic anger. In retrospect I thought of Jesus and the Gadarene man among the tombs possessed by a legion of demons, who “shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I

adjure you by God, do not torment me.” And what did Jesus do? ... He healed him.

### **Scene 3: Church of the Holy Trinity**

The Anglican Church of the Holy Trinity was built in 1847. It's Gothic twin towers were once visible from Lake Ontario as ships approached the harbour. Now, however, the church is surrounded and dwarfed by gleaming skyscrapers arising out of the Eaton's Centre complex. It is also surrounded by a homeless encampment, and has established itself as a haven for the poorest and most abandoned in the heart of the city. From its inception the church has had a "long history of radical hospitality". It's sense of openness and welcome is built in. In 1847 Anglican churches often were a place for displays of wealth and privilege, where position in church could be ensured through buying a pew. A stipulation in the founding gift of £5000 to establish Holy Trinity church, however, was that all the pews must remain free of charge and open to all, forever.

As the city grew around it and the land on which it stands grew more valuable, the church encountered challenges to its sense of mission. The congregation actively and successfully resisted the attempts of the Eaton's Centre to purchase and demolish their buildings. More recently they have embraced the disenfranchised who sought refuge in the square around their building. The church has built a memorial to the downtown street people who have died in Toronto, and has a memorial service on the second Tuesday of each month. Situated in the centre of an area sparkling with affluence and success, the church seems to be something of a relic, or a tomb commemorating a life that is gone. And yet, as we experienced, the life is not gone, but prospers, working to nurture and protect the weak and ill and homeless, those exiled from the mainstream life of the city. I think again of Jesus crossing the sea of Galilee and going to the tombs, where he brought a new life to one of the most lost.

### **Scene 4: Mennonite Action Gathered in Trinity Square**

Our group of Christians gathered for the protest came to about 30 people, about 20 of whom were made up of Anglicans and Uniteds from Toronto and Barrie. The remaining 10 were Mennonites, from Toronto, K/W, Hamilton, and St. Catharines, organized by Mennonite Action Canada's reps from K/W Ken Ogasawara, and from Hamilton/Niagara our own Kit Andres, who had arranged a carpool but due to traffic issues arrived only after we had joined the larger protest.

We ranged in age from our 20s to our 80s, and felt somewhat unnerved at finding ourselves in the midst of the encampment, and outnumbered. We could feel mistrust and hostility emanating from the residents there. We clearly were seen as interlopers in their safe space. One woman of indeterminate age, perhaps 45, perhaps 65, cast suspicious glares our way and protectively swaddled her infant—a naked dolly. The screamer we'd encountered earlier on Bay Street was there, screaming again, gesticulating into the air. And then a couple of vehicles pulled into the square and we were astonished by the church's program to provide a lunchtime meal for the encampment on the back steps of the church. Everyone lined up to wait their turn to be served. This was part of Trinity's Community Hub program which "provides food, clothing, and harm reduction supplies to 100+ people each service day."

We had about half an hour of prayer, hymns, and fellowship, where our still, small voices rose up from the homeless encampment, above the beautiful old church, up past the gleaming towers and into the blue sky toward heaven. It felt good to fellowship together as Christians, even as we felt a bit like the Roman catacombs Christians must have felt in the time of Nero, or perhaps like the Babylonian exiled Jews must have felt in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, or perhaps like the Palestinian Christians and Muslims sheltering in the battered Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza City feel in our own time.

### **Scene 5: At the Protest**

Eventually we sang and marched in the light of God up Bay to Dundas, and east on Dundas to Yonge, past bemused city-dwellers and a

group of helmeted bicycle police and into the swelling, shifting crowd of upwards of 1500 people overflowing the Yonge-Dundas Square. Here the atmosphere was different. At street level the crowd surged as more and more contingents marched into the square. To a persistent, insistent drumbeat the megaphoned chants galvanized the crowd into an echoing mass:

FREE, FREE, PALESTINE : *FREE, FREE, PALESTINE;*

FROM THE RIVER TO THE SEA : *PALESTINE WILL SOON BE FREE;*

LIBERATION SOON WILL COME : *ISRAEL WILL SOON BE GONE...*

The chants got louder and louder, rising up from the surging mass to reverberate with the 100 foot video advertisement screens that surround the square, which is Toronto's version of New York's Times Square. The chants for freedom, for return, for victory over Israel, competed with—and somehow seemed to blend into—the giant technological marvels insistently and persistently pushing the latest movie, or streaming show, or car, or remedy for constipation.

And yet not everyone in the crowd was chanting. Back down at street level our band of peace-seeking Christians hovered near each other and near the cross one of our group carried. Some of us chanted, but others didn't, feeling perhaps as though we were being drawn inexorably into something other than peace. Near us were two people from Jewish Voice for Peace, looking very alone. We seemed to gravitate together. We told them how much we appreciated the courage it took them to be present.

Then out of the crowd a woman approached us with arms outstretched, and tears in her eyes. "Oh! Thank God you Christians are here! I am a Palestinian Christian living in Toronto, and I feel so alone. My church never mentions anything about Gaza." We told her that our church did. We hugged.

What Anita, Jan, and I realized in retrospect, or perhaps what God revealed to us in retrospect, was that there in the Yonge/Dundas Square, at the heart of the affluent west, in the midst of a raging voice of protest endeavouring to compete with what 2 Cor. 4: 4 calls the “god of this age”, we had been participating in the upside-down reality Jesus patiently explained to the disciples after James and John had asked to be elevated to a high seat with Jesus:

<sup>42</sup> Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

In fact, in retrospect we realized that our whole trip had been a kind of living parable, in which God revealed the light of Christ to us through the “least of these brothers and sisters of [ours]”(Matt. 25: 40). And the parable didn’t end at the protest.

### **Scene 6: The Return Journey**

After about an hour in the square, but before the march up Yonge to Bloor began, Anita, Jan, and I decided to head back to Union Station to catch our train home. We felt we had shown support for the mind and heart numbing Palestinian plight, even if we could not stand in full solidarity with the direction of some of the chants. We felt we could justifiably now take our tiring bones out of the surge.

At the Centennial Drive GO Bus stop in Stoney Creek an extremely elderly man with a long gray beard, a threadbare suit, and a mottled fedora approached the bus. He was pulling a foldable cart holding a cardboard box and we thought he was a homeless wanderer, but no, he had a ticket. The driver left the bus to put the cart in the storage compartment underneath, and the old gent asked him if the bus

did indeed go to Fairview Mall, and once reassured that it did, he told the driver he'd been in hospital for two weeks and had just been released. He gingerly climbed the steps then eased himself into the front seat a person had vacated for him as he climbed aboard. Before long he seemed to be drowsing. He still had the hospital band on his wrist.

I couldn't help thinking of John 21: 17-18: 'Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. <sup>18</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.'" And Psalm 71: 9: "Do not cast me away when I am old; / do not forsake me when my strength is gone." And Acts 2: 17: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." I have one regret from the day. I regret that we did not wait for the old gentleman to step off the bus and offer him a ride to his final destination. I guess our own comfort and relief at being back on familiar ground pushed him out of our minds.

And yet I am reminded and reassured by Paul in 2 Cor. 4: 6-9, 16 where he tells us that God "made his light shine in our hearts...."

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. <sup>8</sup> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ... <sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart. Amen

### Benediction

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen