

International Day of Peace: The Right to Peace – The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70

At the beginning of this month I spent a few days in the southern German city of Nuremberg. The city has a rich cultural past, and despite the almost complete destruction of the historic centre towards the end of the Second World War there is still much to see. The city is perhaps best known, though, for its darker more recent past and as the venue for the National Socialist rallies and congresses and for the international trials that followed.

Yet the city has moved on and alongside the main museum is the very moving Street of Human Rights. This consists of an arch and a series of thirty large white concrete columns designed in 1993 by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan. Each column has the wording of one of the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in German and in another language.

This year we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that is the theme of this year's International Day of Peace: The Right to Peace. Article 3 of the Universal Declaration states: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." Although these elements build the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world there is not actually a separate article on the right to peace. And so this year we are invited to ask ourselves what the right to peace means to us.

I cannot imagine any of us would deny the right to peace, apart from those for whom violence is the only way forward to further their particular ideology or their own ends. The right to peace is otherwise self-evident. However, the question as to what the right to peace means to us may be less easy to answer. I would simply like to offer some possible pointers.

At the very least peace is an absence of conflict. On that basis the right to peace is a right to freedom from conflict, violence, persecution, oppression, fear. And yet surely peace is much more than that. It is something much more positive.

Peace exists at many different levels, and I would suggest it begins at the individual level. We need to be at peace within ourselves. That then makes it easier to be at peace with others. Peaceful individuals make up peaceful communities, societies, nations and beyond.

We heard as our Bible reading just now Psalm 83. This adds a theological perspective to our understanding of the right to peace. For the ultimate source of all peace is God. As the Psalmist declares: "I will listen to what the Lord God will say, for he shall speak peace to his people and to the faithful". And then those marvellous verses: "Mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other". This reminds us that peace cannot exist in isolation from mercy, holiness and indeed justice.

And so our prayer is for a right to peace, true peace, deep peace, lasting peace, God's peace.

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