

This photo is available
in the print version
of Peace and War.

William Blake believed that works of art, by offering insights into the metaphysical world, can help rescue us from our materialism and spiritual doubt. In this watercolor drawing he celebrates, with the psalmist, the graceful kiss of Justice and Peace.

William Blake (1757-1827), MERCY AND TRUTH ARE MET TOGETHER. RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PEACE HAVE KISSED EACH OTHER, early 19th century. Watercolor, 43.1 x 37.6 cm. ©V & A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

A Gentle Embrace

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The English printmaker, painter, and poet William Blake believed that works of art, by offering insights into the metaphysical world, can help rescue us from our materialism and spiritual doubt.¹ This watercolor illuminates Psalm 85, especially its celebration of God's forgiveness of the people and their responding faithfulness: "Mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (85:10, KJV).

The artist imagines a scene before God's throne and surrounded by angels. God perhaps is holding a book of judgment. In the foreground, personifications of justice (or righteousness) and peace sit facing away from one another. Yet at this moment they turn to kiss, and within their embrace we see a crimson cross. The entire composition is graceful in its curvaceous lines and willowy forms.

True reconciliation always involves a delicate balance of peace with justice, and mercy with truth. This truth came home to peacemaker John Paul Lederach when he traveled with the International Conciliation team of the Mennonite Central Committee during the Nicaraguan civil war. The team reflected on Psalm 85:10 daily, he recalls, imagining four voices—of mercy, truth, righteousness, and peace—coming before God with their varying perspectives on the tragic discord in Nicaragua.

Lederach discovered that the verse, when understood this way, communicated to diplomats, rebel generals, and peasants alike. As an exercise in reconciliation, he invited individuals or small groups to identify with one of the voices and to ask, "What would this voice say in our situation of conflict? Truth, he reports, wanted to establish what really happened; mercy desired to forgive and move forward. Justice called for a full accounting of wrongdoing; peace was ready for healing to begin.²

Blake chooses to depict Justice and Peace, rather than Mercy and Truth. Only through their gentle embrace, as personified in Blake's painting and manifested in Lederach's experience, can reconciliation be achieved.

NOTES

1 David Bindman: "Blake, William," *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, (Oxford University Press, Accessed [11 June 2004]) <<http://www.groveart.com>>.

2 See the interview "The Heart of Reconciliation: A Conversation with John Paul Lederach" in *Forgiveness*, volume 1, *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (2001):78-84. His story of using Psalm 85:10 is on pp. 83-84.