A key phrase in today’s gospel can’t help but strike many of us as surprising. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” Jesus asks, “No, I tell you, not peace but rather division.” Matthew’s version of the same saying is more pointed. “I have not come to bring peace,” Jesus says, “but the sword.”

Sayings like these raise questions. How, for example, does such language go along with our image of Jesus as the Prince of Peace, as someone with whom we associate words like mercy, compassion, and love?

The peace we long for and cherish takes many forms. People caught up in the war in Ukraine or in other wars seek, at the very least, an end to the killing and destructiveness to which they are subjected. Others long for social peace or peace in their families. The background for the New Testament understanding of peace is evoked by the Hebrew word Shalom, a traditional greeting among Jews and other Semitic peoples. Shalom is more that an absence of war. It suggests a fullness of life and of well-being.

The search for, and the fostering of, peace are at the heart of the biblical vision of human life. This is clear in the biblical accounts of creation. The ideal of human life, they suggest, is peace, peace with God, with the world, with other human beings and with ourselves. These various forms of peace are meant to reinforce and strengthen one another. Sin, on the other hand, threatens to undermine them. We find ourselves at odds with all those with whom we were meant to be at peace.

The New Testament is full of references to peace When Jesus says that he has not come to bring peace but the sword and division, he is thinking of what might be called a false peace. A man once told me that he had recognized a difficult and unhealthy relationship developing in his family, but instead of confronting and trying to deal with it, he, as he put it, “chose peace.”

We have all experienced at one time or another the desire that people will just leave us alone, leave us in peace, that they will not try to force us to be active or make decisions or do something more positive with our life. Here as elsewhere we are seeking a false peace.

Almost all the references in the NT to peace, apart from today’s reading, emphasize the word’s positive meaning. It is something to which we are called to contribute. Jesus includes working for peace among the beatitudes. “Blessed are the peace makers,” he says, “for they will be called children of God.” They will reflect in their life the one in whose image they have been created.

In the New Testament, peace is something for which we are both to work and to pray. In its deepest sense, peace is a spiritual reality, which takes root in our heart and gradually transforms us from within.

Peace of this nature is more a gift than something that we are able to bring about on our own. In his discourse after the Last Supper Jesus, after telling the disciples of his coming death, consoles and assures them with the promise, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.”

Peace as a wish and a prayer stands at the beginning and the end of the gospel account of the life of Jesus. Luke’s version of the appearance of the angels to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus comes to a climax when the angel proclaims, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours.”

In the Gospel of John’s account of the first Easter, the risen Jesus greets the disciples saying, “Peace be with you.”

Almost all of Paul’s letters contain an initial greeting summed up in the words grace and peace. Grace is a gift, in this case a gift of forgiveness and love, a gift of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit’s presence in us is peace.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul urges believers to rejoice in God. “The peace of God,” he says, “which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” He then assures them that if they continue to live by the faith they have embraced, “the God of peace will be with (them).”

One of the things many of us seek in coming to church whether for a visit on our own or as part of a celebrating community is peace, peace in the world and among nations, peace in our family and with our neighbours.

Among the many references to peace in the Mass, the most developed is the one just before communion. It and the sign of peace we extend to one another are intended to prepare us as individuals and as a community for communion.

One of the options for the final words of the priest at the end of Mass, the so-called dismissal, is “Go in peace.” May the peace that we share become ever more rooted in us to the point that we are able to be for others a source of peace.