**1st December 2019**

**Isaiah 2.1-5, Matthew 24.36-44**

The Quarry Chapel, our sister church in this town where I am also the minster, if but scoped for 5% of my time, is trying to find a new purpose and new life. Through their development worker Abi Nicol, who has been funded by the Synod, they are making themselves known in the community up there on the Woodfield’s estate. Abi, a former art teacher, has worked with 24 community groups and individuals to create a 3D Advent Calendar that will be on display outside the church throughout this month – a box being lit up each day as the countdown to Christmas begins. Hope you can take a moment to go up there and see it.

The first box will be lit later today and features a dove of peace, made by our own children here in Tab Too. Abi came in a few weeks ago and got the children to make it and the dove of peace rests on some clay hands. It is as if the hands of God are offering to the world the chance of peace.

Unfortunately, Abi’s dog Toby ate the dove later that week and so Roseanna I believe made another dove to replace it. There is a parable there! The offer of peace is savaged by our animal nature but undaunted it can be remade and accepted once again.

Our Christmas publicity material has the phrase ‘Peace on Earth’. It was a song the angels sang on Christmas night of course, announcing the birth of Jesus. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

These words were spoken about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. This child was long awaited and the expectations on him were staggering. How could one person bring about world peace?

Israel was desperate for peace. It was a small nation, surrounded by powerful enemies and facing constant threat. In Jesus time they were under Roman rule. But it wasn’t just political peace they longed for though, it was peace with God.

Peace may feel like a faraway concept for you this Christmas. Maybe you feel despair at the political landscape, perhaps your family are at loggerheads, or maybe you are just overwhelmed by the demands of life.

This Advent I shall spend three sermons outlining how Jesus offers Peace on Earth.

Let’s start with the prophet Isaiah. In chapter two he writes a poem of universal peace (vv.2-4). It is also found in Micah (4.1-3).

They will beat their swords into ploughshares  
    and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will not take up sword against nation,  
    nor will they train for war anymore.

The poem has become truly popular only relatively recently. It is, for example, inscribed on a sculpture placed in 1959 at the entrance to the United Nations building in New York. It’s a nice image and pithy saying and an idealistic aspiration.

However, the context is acknowledging that God is God:

The previous verse sates:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
    to the temple of the God of Jacob.  
He will teach us his ways,  
    so that we may walk in his paths.”

Its hope is that the whole world will walk in the light of Israel’s Lord, whose word is instruction (torah/law, v.3 – see Psalm 119.102-106) to love God and neighbour.

Later, Joel 3.10-11 reverses the imagery, ironically urging the nations to beat ploughshares into swords and pruning hooks into spears, confident of victory for the Lord’s warriors! When Israel believed it had sole rights to its tribal God it would be confident of victory over its enemies. Sadly religious people have not always been peaceful nor nonviolent. Believing God is solely on your side brings out the zealot.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace because through the advent of Christ the world realized that God is God of all the world. All peoples belong to God. God is not a tribal deity – so that wars are squabbles not only over territories or gold and silver – but whose god is bigger – my god or your god?

The advent of Jesus was universal – God so loved the whole world he gave us his Son– not just God loved the United Sates, not just God loved Scotland and they could be independent. Not that god hated the Palestinians or the Mexicans, or the communists or whoever we want to build a wall round to keep them out and stop them from polluting us. God so loved the whole world he sent his son and died for us all.

That’s the miracle of the cross. When we begin to understand the love offered from the cross, we want to change our relationship with God and others. The walls come down. We cannot remain the same anymore. Our hostility to God and to others is changed.

They flung all sorts of accusations at Jesus on the cross: ‘If you are the king of the Jews save yourself?’ His whole ministry had been about saving people: helping them find themselves, helping people realise they are loved and accepted by God, helping people find healing and wholeness, helping people play their part in community again. On the cross, all he got was sarcastic criticism and violent opposition.

People say that words can't hurt you. They can hurt you. Words can dehumanize. That's why in war the enemy is always described in language that is dehumanizing. You will never hear the military referring to the enemy as "brothers and sisters," or as "children of God." They couldn't kill them if they referred to them that way. You use language that describes the enemy as less than human.  
  
But there are words that heal. There are words that build. There are words that create. There are words that unite. There are words that can redeem. There are words that can reconcile you to someone from whom you are estranged. There are words that lead to peace.

Jesus said to the thief on the cross when asked to remember him when Jesus came into his kingdom "This day you will be with me in paradise." It was a beautiful thing to say and has offered words of hope to the dying and condemned ever since.

That’s why a belief in God, a belief in Jesus should lead you to a life of peace. Because God is the God of all. We are all children of God – why would you go to war with your own siblings. You may have disagreements with them but not surely to the point of death?

But what if you don’t believe in God? Fewer and fewer people in our society profess faith. It is intellectually fashionable and culturally acceptable to profess atheism. Yet we still have a high acceptance of fundamental human rights and dignity of human being – so far. But the basis for that without a belief in God, is, I would argue, flimsy. Atheists like science and reason as the basis for what they can say about who we are and what we are like.

Scientists will all agree that there is nothing more inevitable and natural than violence – evolution and natural selection are based on it. Yet we believe it is bad most of the times. And everyone can easily imagine and want a world more marvellous than the one we have. Where all are treated equally. Yet other societies and cultures have not had that belief. Nazism believed in the master race – and ruthlessly annihilated weaker and deviant subjects. Communist China doesn’t tolerate freedom of belief and divergent lifestyles but like true Marxists will say the end justifies the means – people are expendable so long as we achieve our goal.

We talk about progressive societies – but of course someone’s progressiveness is someone’s regression and repression.

Clive James the journalist and broadcaster who died this week was an atheist by conviction. He famously described religion as "an advertising agency for a product that does not exist." Well Clive you will know now. But what gave you that certainty beforehand? How do you know there is nothing after death? Why is that a progressive belief? It takes as much faith to believe there isn’t anything after death as it does to believe there is?

One of the most common secular responses is to see death as nothing to fear but part of the living story of the world. The most famous popular culture expression of this account is put forth in the movie the Lion King (which maybe one of DVD presents this Christmas) in which young Simba is told that though lions eat antelopes, they eventually die and fertilize the grass, and the antelopes eat the grass, ‘and so we are all connected in the circle of life’.

The philosopher Peter Kreeft[[1]](#endnote-1) recounts the story of a seven-year-old whose cousin died at the age of three. He asked his mother ‘where is my cousin now?’ She did not believe in god or the afterlife, and so she could not with integrity talk about heaven. Instead she followed this modern secular narrative. ‘your cousin has gone back to the earth from which we all come. Death is a natural part of the cycle of life. And so, when you see the earth put forth new flowers next spring, you can know that it is your cousin’s life that is fertilizing those flowers.’

How did the little boy respond? He screamed ‘I don’t want him to be fertilizer!’ and ran away. Kreeft argues that the mother had let the modern secular narrative supress the natural human intuition that death is not natural after all. That we long for hope that death is not the end. That death is our ultimate fear – and a belief in Jesus offers the ultimate hope and peace.

The coming of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus challenges our fatalism and secularism and punctures the dark celling of our materialistic world with hope of a better one. No wonder the gospel writers hail Jesus as the prince of peace. They describe the conversation Jesus has with his disciples on the night he was betrayed:

*But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.****27****Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

*John 14.26-27*

When we know Jesus Christ in our lives, we have the inner assurance, through the advocate, the Holy Spirit, of a deep peace, that passes understanding – that we are held by God, whatever.

Many see in the Matthew passage no triumphalistic hope that all in this world will be well. Our hope lies beyond this world to a new heaven and a new earth and this passage has Jesus telling us to be ready for our own death and the great step into the unknown, whenever it is asked of us. That’s one of the many reasons why keeping short accounts with God, through regular worship, prayer, self-examination and Christian obedience, matters as much as it does.

William Willimon tells the story of a funeral he attended when he was serving a small congregation in rural Georgia. One of his members' relatives died, so Willimon and his wife attended the funeral held in an off-brand, country Baptist church. He writes: "I had never seen anything like it. The preacher began to preach. He shouted; he flailed his arms. 'It's too late for Joe. He's dead. But it ain't too late for you. People drop dead every day. Why wait? Now is the day for decision. Give your life to Jesus.' "  
  
Willimon goes on to suggest that this was the worst thing he had ever seen. He fumed and fussed at his wife Patsy, complaining that the preacher had done the worst thing possible for a grieving family - manipulating them with guilt and shame. Patsy agreed. But then she said: "Of course the worst part of it all is that what he said is true."

Now is the day for decision. Give your life to Jesus the Prince of Peace. Know his Peace. Know Peace with God – then use that as a basis for practising peace with others, with the world.' "  
  
  
My friends, each one of us lives in the shadow of the apocalypse - the dark reality of the end of our time and the end of the world's time. Our workshops last weekend on the environmental emergency and our response to it was timely warning to act now and it should be an important issue for this election. Advent is about warning. The ice is melting.

But there is also good news. There is also the promise of Advent - the promise that in the darkness, in the shadows, in the unpredictable anxiety of our unfinished lives, God is present. God is in control, and God will come again. With each candle we light, the shadows recede a bit, and the promise comes closer. With each candle we light, we are proclaiming that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. The promise is that wherever there is darkness and dread in our lives, wherever there is darkness and dread in the world around us, God is present to help us endure. God is in charge, and hope is alive. And as long and as interminable as the night seems, morning will come - in God's good time and God's good way because he has given us Jesus the Prince of Peace.

1. Timothy Keller, Making Sense of God, Hodder, 2016, Ch 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)