**6th December 2015**

**Isaiah 11**

Did you know that hanging lights on a Christmas tree is one of the three most stressful situations in an ongoing relationship? The other two danger zones are teaching your partner to drive and wallpapering.

I bring you this list of ‘Things not to say when hanging the lights on the Christmas tree’:

1. ‘You’ve got two red lights right next to each other, dummy. You’re supposed to go yellow, green, red, blue, not yellow, red, red, green, blue…’
2. Up a little higher. You can reach it. Go on, try’.
3. What did you do to these lights when you put them way last year? Tie them in knots?
4. ‘Give me that!’
5. You’ve got the whole thing upside down. The plug is supposed to be down here at the bottom, not up at the top.
6. You’ve just wound them around and around. I thought we agreed it would look like a spiral this year!’
7. Have you been drinking?
8. Where’s the cat?

There may be little peace on earth as we get ready for Christmas.

Today is the second Sunday in advent when the theme is traditionally peace. Last week I looked at hope. This week the theme is peace. Which of course is ironic in a week in which our MPs voted in favour of war – extending the air strikes and bombing to Syria in an attempt to degrade and diminish Islamic state, or ISIL or Daeesh or whatever we now call them. There was much debate about whether bombing them would merely satisfy our desire for retribution and playing a full part with other Western powers or whether it would exacerbate the situation and made us less secure and produce more terrorists. I’m sure we will all have different opinions on how to combat terrorism. No-one I’m sure is wanting to sympathise with the terrorists.

Stephen Tomkins in his editorial for our national church magazine, Reform [[1]](#endnote-1)writes the following:

The first question in any war has to be: how do we achieve peace? One answer is by fighting. There are times in our history when going to war has proved the lesser of evils and the shortest road to the best peace. The repulsion of the Spanish Armada in 1588 is one. Unfortunately because Isis forces are not sailing towards us in gunboats, western powers have found it extremely hard to attack them, in a controlled, targeted way. Every western bomb that kills innocent Iraqis or Syrians strengthens Isis’ message to Muslims: that it is fighting for them against the powers of evil and deserves their support. Calling for a massive military retaliation clearly makes MPs and journalists feel better, but the single most obvious lesson of the last 14 years of the ‘war on terror’ is that it will make our situation much worse.

Are there any paths to peace? The Arab Spring activist from the United Arab Emirates. Iyad El-Baghdadi, who monitors between 200 -300 jihadist Twitter accounts, said that nothing has annoyed Islamists more about Europe recently than ‘watching their very humane and moral response to the refugee crises. It has to weaken Isis’ claim to be championing Islam when the Muslims whose homes they destroy in their millions are welcomed by the west. This is one reason why it is tragic to hear US and European politicians planning to turn away refugees in response. Selecting Christian refugees for asylum over their Muslim neighbours is wrong headed as well as wrong hearted for the same reasons.

Another peace opportunity is Palestine. The oppression of its people by the Israeli State is one cause and justification often cited by Islamists for their atrocities. As the writer John Pilger has said: ‘give justice to Palestinians and you begin to change the world around them’.

These are two ways we can all join the hard work for peace. War, even when it is unavoidable, is always fighting evil with evil; these are the ways we can oppose evil with good.’

Our Bible reading today from Isaiah 11 speaks about the coming Messiah and the hope for a peaceable kingdom where ‘*the wolf will lie with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. ‘*

In other words a land where those who were formerly predators and those who were the prey, will come together as one and be led by a little child. You can see why the early Christians saw this prophecy fulfilled by the coming of Jesus – the child born as the Prince of Peace – the one to unite all of humanity as the loved children of God and to bring the whole of creation back into unity with its creator.

But there can be no peace without justice. You know that from personal conflicts. There can be no peace until justice has been done – you are not right with others until hurt and harm has been admitted and apologies offered and accepted and things put right.

Look at what the hoped for Messiah would be like.

*He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decides what he hears with his ears, but with righteousness he will judge the needy with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. Verses 3-4*

The king would practice righteousness and equity that are not based on surface appearances or on what is said, because a discerning ruler is not to be influenced by gestures of the wealthy or swayed by the manipulations of the powerful.

Our world is competitive and oppressive. So many are bothered by their appearance and looks. We all fear being judged by others – are we in the in crowd, are we cool, do we have the right things, go to the right places. You can smell the fear of insecurity in our society of people afraid of being left out or left behind. It starts at school and carries on into adulthood.

The wealthy and the powerful seek to use their advantage and benefit.

Here is this poem that speaks of a different kingdom, where the disorder and distortion of human relationships is put right. The devouring competition and the old practice of the big ones eating the little ones will not be allowed. In this kingdom the lion will lie with the lamb. The new world will be safe for the vulnerable and the poor. The poem is about deep radical, limitless transformation in which we – like lion, wolf, leopard – will have no hunger for injury, no need to devour, or compete to win, no yearning for brutal control, no passion for domination. This is the peaceable kingdom.

It comes about because the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The word for peace in Hebrew is ‘Shalom’. As it does in English, it can refer to either peace between two entities (especially between man and God or between two countries), or to the well-being, welfare or safety of an individual or a group of individuals. It is about harmony, wholeness, completeness and tranquillity. But it has its roots in God. Creation being reconnected with its creator.

So the deep biblical understanding of peace is that first and foremost we need to be at peace with God. We need to have knowledge of God. We need to stop the rebellion where we decided we want to go it alone, be our own God, and come back in union, in relationship with our creator to work together in a harmonious relationship for the good of the whole of creation.

You will not truly be at peace until you are at peace with God. You can go to however many spas, do however many courses on yoga and wellbeing meditations, enjoy as many walks in the countryside and have fleeting feelings of being at one but the essential issue is ‘have you made peace with God?’

As the saying goes: ‘people want peace – but they don’t want the Prince’. Christmas comes along to remind us that we are not on our own and the disorder and rebellion and conflict in with world and in ourselves has a root in sin which is about our dislocation and estrangement from our Creator: our refusal to accept the Prince of Peace over our lives. Can we know we are loved and are at one with God our creator? This is the knowledge of God.

It is an immensely powerful and life transforming experience to come to the realisation that you are created in the image of God, you are loved by God and that you don’t need to strive for that acceptance and love and that the person next to you is equally loved by God.

Theories of child development psychology shed much light on our spiritual journey. Children, when they are born, having come from the womb, feel that they are one with the whole world. Through early infancy they realise they are separate and an individual and that can cause panic and fear.

Depending on how they are surrounded by love will determine whether they become trusting individuals. Each time the holding hands of life seem to fail, it will be harder for her to get back to that trust. When she was small there was no one separate to her being, no one who was not a friend. Now the roles are reversed and the world contains her. Her consciousness is walled and protected. Everyone is separate. Different separate identities are being formed. Competition begins. Conflict happens. Peace and oneness is broken.

The spiritual task is for communion – togetherness – with God and with the whole of humanity, indeed the whole of creation. We started life feeling at one with the world – we journey through life that tries to separate us out and divide us up creating competition and conflict and wars and unpeace all along the way. We separate into genders, we separate into colours, into social classes. We separate into sporting rivalries, sexual preferences, age, culture, geography, religion, and politics. We become cut off from each other. We like our tribes, we like the negativity they permit, we like the way they damage the oneness of all things. We like it how it is: some people in, some people out. Otherwise how could we pass judgement on others?

Separate selves are kings of categories and queens of division. It’s the only way to organise things, bring things under order. If the nursery teacher divides the class into boys in one corner and girls in another there is no great evil done but ultimately those children are not two groups but one group.

In an adult world, the separation of one group from another has had rather more serious repercussions and the struggle for power by one group over another.

Jimi Hendrix the famous guitarist once said:[[2]](#endnote-2)

When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace.

Jesus didn’t attempt to change society but to change the individual first and foremost. He was less concerned with social programmes and more concerned with making social people – people able to think, feel and act as sane people, at home and at peace with their truest selves and at one and at peace with the world. Thomas a Kempis a Christian saint from the 14th century, meditating on imitating Christ said: ‘First keep peace with yourself, then you can also bring peace to others’.

Once we are at peace with ourselves and God then we may stop segregating others. We will become suspicious of labels. We see, for instance that there are no weak people and no strong people. There are just people, all loved by God, sometimes weak and sometimes strong. All labels are lazy. A person who sits weeping and weak one day may very well be strong the next day in another situation.

People are laid low by different things. Physical illness, mental illness, emotional traumas and spiritual darkness’s. Short term crisis and long term difficulties; people are tired, stressed by work or simply undervaluing themselves. But try not to pigeon-hole them as weak. For despite their weakness, each possesses great strength. And sometimes it’s because of their weakness they possess great strength.

Weakness is part of who they are. But not **all** of who they are.

As soon as we separate and declare some to be weak or evil, we deny them the possibility of mediating strength or goodness and therefore deny them their humanity. The weakness or the evil may be overpowering. But it’s only part of who they are: a distortion of being created in God’s image.

Of course some people may not help themselves. Some demand their separation. Some will insist on being strong all the time, adopting the role of one who looks after others. Some will insist on being weak all the time, declaring themselves to be a constant mess and always in need of help. Some will insist they are right and others are evil. Challenge is sometimes necessary to such attitudes.

But we need to be careful because history shows that we do bad things to people when we separate them from ourselves. It makes peace less likely for ourselves inwardly and also between us and others.

John Lennon could sing[[3]](#endnote-3):

‘Imagine all the people living life in peace. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will be as one.’

Martin Luther King, Jr. said[[4]](#endnote-4):

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

Isaiah the prophet predicts that *The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (11.8-9).*

Ogden Nash said ‘people can’t concentrate on blowing other people to pieces if their minds are poisoned by thoughts suitable to the 25th of December.’

There was a story from the Second World War when the Allies were advancing through France. The Germans were making a last stand whenever they could. During a night of heavy fighting the opposing armies moved very close. Just a long green meadow and one farmhouse separated them.

As dawn came, the fog lifted. Bullets and bombs began to explode and men began to die. After a long period of severe battle the house in the green meadow was hit and began to burn. Then someone whispered, ‘look!’ it was unbelievable, but there was a small baby crawling across the field.

As the soldiers saw the child, the shooting stopped. It became very still. Every eye was on the baby. Suddenly, a soldier got up from his position, ran out into the open, grabbed the baby up in his arms, and ran back to his line. In a moment a great cheer went up on both sides But then the bullets began to fly again.

The baby brought peace just for a moment.

May God poison our minds with thoughts of the true meaning of Christmas over these next few weeks. That as we focus on Jesus, born Prince of Peace, born to show us how loved we are – so loved that God gave his only Son for us – so he may be our peace – peace with God, peace with the world and peace for ourselves. May he satisfy our needs and aspirations, stay our sin and calm our lurking fears and grant us peace.

Questions:

What is the least peaceful part of Christmas for you?

Is there any chance of peace with Islamic State?

Isaiah’s poem of peace – how idealistic is it? What is wrong/right with idealism?

Is peace with God fundamental to peace within yourself and between others?

Why shouldn’t we separate people?

Why is Jesus’ coming a sign of peace?

Discuss any of the quotes on peace contained in the sermon.

1. Stephen Tomkins, editorial, Reform, December 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Read more at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic\_peace.html#SePV7AYC4zdYzaUe.99 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Read more at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic\_peace.html#SePV7AYC4zdYzaUe.99 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Read more at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic\_peace.html#SePV7AYC4zdYzaUe.99 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)