

The Peaceful Kingdom

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on 4th December 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings **Isaiah 11:1-10**, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12
Revised Common Lectionary Year A, 2nd Sunday of Advent

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall
inquire of him,
and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Introduction:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid...*

*They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

With these words, Isaiah the prophet writes of a vision of universal harmony, an end to violence and destruction, a golden age of peace. This year, like most years, we will be doing our Christmas shopping without fear of bomb attacks, and expect to celebrate Christmas with feasting and drinking; but knowing that people in many parts of the world will be cowering in fear of violence and destruction. Others will be going hungry or sleeping in the cold.

What, you might ask, has a prophecy written more than 2 and a half thousand years ago got to say to our world today? My answer is, too much to fit in this sermon! Some people, I think, look on Christmas as a brief opportunity to escape from the harsh realities of life – a bit of fantasy and escapism. But for Christians, the good news of the Incarnation, and the prophecies of the Old Testament that foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah, give us a vision to aspire to, and a ray of light on the horizon that brings hope for the future, and inspiration to work for peace and justice today.

The wolf of Gubbio

Reading that verse about the wolf living with the lamb reminded me of a story which I have been telling to the KS1 children of St Michael's, Uplands and New Scotland Hill Primary Schools over the past couple of weeks. It was part of an assembly presentation about St Francis, who as you will remember was not only a champion of the poor and sick, but a lover of nature and all of God's creation. The story goes that the town of Gubbio in Italy was threatened by a fierce lone wolf, who attacked both animals and people. The townspeople called in St Francis to see if he could help them. Francis approached the wolf and spoke to him thus:

"Brother Wolf, you have done great harm to this region, not only destroying other creatures without mercy, but you even have the brazenness to kill and devour human beings made in the image of God. You deserve severe punishment; but I want to make peace between you and the town, so that they will not be harmed by you any more and after they have forgiven you, neither men or dogs will pursue you any more. I promise that the town will feed you every day; I know that what you did, you did out of hunger."

The wolf indicated that it would accept these terms, and offered the saint his paw as a sign of the pact. The town promised to do what the saint had bargained, and the town adopted the wolf, and fed him until the day he died.¹

The natural reaction of the people of Gubbio had been to fight back against the wolf. But Francis' vision of wolf and people recognising each other's needs and agreeing to live together in harmony was the one that was the most successful in the end. What was needed was the intervention of someone who dared to believe that God's way was not only better, but achievable.

The wolf and the lamb

Isaiah's vision of wolves living with lambs and the leopard lying down with the young goat is, of course, a poetic image. Essentially he is speaking about how the most diverse of people could actually live harmoniously together, and how those whose preferred method of meeting their needs is violence and oppression of the weak could actually learn to live peaceably with others. If the lion can learn to eat straw like the ox, perhaps the jihadi terrorists of the so-called Islamic State could also learn to renounce violence. It happened in Northern Ireland, and it happened in South Africa; it seems now to be happening between the Government and the FARQ rebels in Columbia. It is also happening quietly and in the background between Palestinians and Israelis in the Holy Land.

What is needed, of course, is a change of attitude in the minds of those who have up to now seen violence as a means to achieve their ends. It's actually the same attitude that John the Baptist is calling for in our gospel reading from Matthew. "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means a change of mind. And actually it's not only the wolves that need to change their way of thinking, but the lambs, the goats and the calves too. When Isaiah says that *the wolf shall live with the lamb*, the Hebrew word for "live" is the word meaning to live as a foreigner or guest. It implies that the lamb, the goat and the calf are allowing these erstwhile enemies to settle amongst them. In our New Testament reading from Romans, St Paul is writing to a church that contains people from different backgrounds, both Jews and Gentiles. He urges them "welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed

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you". For peace to be embedded, we all need to remember how Jesus has forgiven and accepted us, and be open to thinking, speaking and acting peaceably, willing to make friends out of former enemies. If you think about it, Christmas is all about reconciliation – God reaching out to rebellious humanity with an offer of forgiveness and friendship, the very attitude that St Francis was embodying with the wolf of Gubbio. I wonder whether there is anyone you know to whom you need to reach out in reconciliation this Christmas? Or even, is someone else reaching out a hand of reconciliation to you? Are you willing to swallow your pride, listen to the other person's side of the story and make peace based on forgiveness?

The promised Messiah

This vision of an age of peace is not the first in the book of Isaiah. In chapter 2 he writes of swords being beaten into ploughshares, a prophecy which some of us heard read from the book of Micah at last Sunday evening's Advent service. Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries, but I don't know whether Isaiah borrowed the prophecy from Micah or *vice versa*. And then in chapter 9 we have another prophecy of violence and warfare being ended under the reign of one who will be called *Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*. It is useful to be aware of the historical context for Isaiah's writings: the kingdom of Judah, where he lived, was under threat from an enemy every bit as terrifying and ruthless as the so-called Islamic State: the empire of Assyria, which, interestingly enough, was based in what we now call northern Iraq. You can find out all about it in the British Museum.

If we reflect on current political realities, or study history, it is fairly obvious that for any nation or people to live in peace and harmony they need a good government. In the ancient world that meant a good king, one who recognised his responsibility for caring for his people by making laws that upheld justice and seeing that they were enforced, so that those who were the most vulnerable in society were protected from those who would seek to exploit them. In the Old Testament the kings who do this are those who are said to "fear the Lord", in other words they recognise that they are in turn accountable to God and they show respect for him by worshipping him and keeping his laws themselves.

King David, for all his faults, is described as "a man after God's own heart". And so it is not surprising that the picture of the king who will reign over God's people in Isaiah's prophecy of a peaceful kingdom is a descendent of David, described in verse 1 as "a shoot from the stock of Jesse" (Jesse, you may remember, was David's father). This King, or Messiah as he came to be known, will be filled with the Spirit of God, and would have all God's wisdom. He will judge not according to appearances or hearsay but with true justice and righteousness, defending the poor. His mouth will utter judgements that will bring punishment to the wicked. If you are squeamish about the idea of the wicked being punished, you might like to consider how any society can maintain justice if those who exploit others for their own benefit are allowed to get away with it. The description of the Messiah killing the wicked is only what any decent moral person of Isaiah's time would have expected.

Fortunately for all of us, God's revelation through Jesus offers an alternative – repentance, which, you will remember, means a change of heart. This was what John the Baptist, for all his hellfire rhetoric, was offering. But a change of heart is only real when it is translated into a change in behaviour, and so John warns people to "bear fruit worthy of repentance". Advent is intended to be a time of reflection and self-examination rather like Lent. We need to find some time amidst the busyness of shopping, cooking and partying to consider whether our choices and priorities actually reflect the values we claim to be celebrating at Christmas – love, joy and peace. The fact that our heavenly King, who will one day judge the world, chose to live on earth "with the poor and mean and lowly" should challenge us to consider those who are less fortunate than us and direct some of our Christmas generosity their way.

Christmas, of course, is a time of joy and celebration, especially if you have experienced the grace of God in your own life.. Indeed, we have far more reason to celebrate than those who think it's all about letting your hair down and indulging yourself. When we reflect on how God has reached out

to us in Jesus, we will want to offer ourselves to him as agents of his peace, justice and reconciliation in the world, starting with those who are around us. We will also want to pray for those places and people where God's peace, justice and reconciliation are most needed.

St Paul quotes from the Greek translation of Isaiah 11:10 in Romans 15:12-13, emphasising that Isaiah's vision gives us grounds for looking at our lives and the world with hope:

'The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.'

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion: a Vision for the Future

I'd like to finish by quoting from a message written by our new Bishop of Oxford, Steven Croft.

"In Advent we read together the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah is called the fifth gospel by the early Church. The book is written against a background of immense suffering and difficulty. In almost every chapter there are flashes of hope and promises of joy. The world will not always be as it is. There is a better vision. The servant of God, the saviour, will come.

There is a pressing need to proclaim this Advent hope as 2016 draws to a close. The world has been shaken this year. Britain, Europe and America face a more uncertain future. As a Church we need to set out clearly the Christian hope, God's vision for the world and for human flourishing."

This vision that the Bishop mentions, God's vision for the world, needs to be embedded in the way we run our church here at St Michael's, as we seek to reach out in different ways to those in our immediate community and to those who are more distant from us through our charitable giving. Let us also, as individual members of Christ's Church, take some time this Advent to let this vision inspire and guide us in our own lives.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,
in sending your Son into the world to be our Saviour
you have opened to us and to all people a door
into your Kingdom of peace, justice and love.
Help us, who have from your fullness received grace upon grace,
to be ambassadors of your peace and agents of your love,
that the world may be reconciled to you and know you as its true King;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.