

Sunday 1st December – Advent Sunday

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-end

Matt 24:36-44

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more

Wonderful words from the prophet Isaiah, written nearly 3000 years ago to a nation caught up in war and fighting and oppression; to a nation that had turned their back on truth and the word of God, and were now facing up to the consequences. To a nation very different from our own in many ways, but a nation so similar to our own in other ways. To a nation that seemed to be wandering about aimlessly in darkness and despair, unsure of where they were going or how they would get there.

And the prophet Isaiah brings to the nation a vision, a dream, that one day things would be different, things would be better. A vision that peoples and nations would live together in peace and harmony. That swords, spears and we can extend that to include guns, bombs, knives, and machetes would not be needed anymore, and could be melted down to provide useful tools that will build up and help communities thrive, rather than weapons which cut down and destroy.

He brings a vision that we are reminded of each Christmas tide as we retell the story of the birth of the Prince of Peace and as we tell of the angels singing out across the dark skies of Bethlehem *Peace on earth – goodwill to all people*.

A vision that makes us look at the world around us in despair; a vision that makes us ask the question why is it like this?; a vision that makes us wonder if such peace and harmony can ever become a reality.

The poet Henry Longfellow mused on the vision, and the way its fulfilment seemed to be so unachievable. His eldest son had been killed in the American civil war and he wrote these words:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,*

*And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*And in despair I bowed my head;
'There is no peace on earth,' I said;
'For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!'*

Perhaps we feel the same.

So I wonder - are we deluding ourselves when we sing the old Christmas carols and tell the familiar story of the birth of Jesus. Will that vision that Isaiah had of peace and harmony ever become a reality? Indeed, can that vision ever become a reality?

The contrast between light and darkness is a recurring theme in scripture as illustrated in each of our readings today. In the Isaiah reading, the prophet ends the account of his vision with the words "*Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord*"

In the letter to the Romans Paul urges the Christians in Rome to *lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light*.

And in the gospel from Matthew, Jesus talks about thieves that come in the night – in the darkness when they will not be seen.

Elsewhere Jesus says he is the Light of the world; he urges us to be as lights and not to hide our lights under bushel baskets but to let them shine out.

The first words in the Bible in those beginning verses of Genesis are *Let there be Light* – and it was when light came into the world that life was possible, that the earth changed from being a formless void covered by darkness (let's ponder on those words for a moment – formless void darkness – the absence of form, the absence of matter, the absence of light – a nothingness) to being a world which could bring forth and support life. And God saw that the light was good.

Fast forward to the birth of Jesus. As we have mentioned already, the angels appeared in the darkness of night, the dark sky changed into the brightness of day by the light and glory of God as the words rang out – Peace on earth and good will to all people!

Fast forward again to the death of Jesus. As he died at the noon of the day, we read that darkness came upon the land for three hours. In a reversal of the angelic appearance, the brightness of the noon day becomes the darkness of night. Light as he was born; darkness as he died symbolising the light being put out.

And this light – the walking in the light, the light being our armour - is the clue to the fulfilment of the prophecy; this is the clue as to how peace and harmony can begin to work their way across the world; this is the clue as to how swords can be beaten into ploughs and spears into pruning hooks; this is the clue as to how tanks can be transformed into tractors and guns into garden tools.

Isaiah finishes his prophecy with the words walk in the light of the Lord. In the prayer that we used as we lit the first of our advent candles we reminded ourselves that God calls us out of darkness to walk in the light of his coming

It is by walking in that light that we can begin to make a difference and begin to bring that vision of peace and harmony into a reality. Darkness is only the absence of light. Once we bring light into the world the darkness is dispelled and hope is rekindled.

Walking in the light of the Lord means following the example of the life of Jesus; it means looking for good and not bad in people; it means seeing everyone as a fellow human being, loved and valued by God; it means seeking the well being of others as being of more importance than our own self interest; it means living out the summary of the law as given by Jesus – love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and loving your neighbour as yourself.

It means giving of time, energy, money and our very selves for others. It means a way of life that is totally counter cultural and therefore can be both difficult and challenging.

It affects the whole of our lives. It means – for example – casting your vote in the upcoming general election not simply for the party that will make you better off, or serve your self interest, but casting your vote in such a way as to bring benefit to those who have least; to make the whole country a better place, to spread light rather than darkness.

The light came into the world at Bethlehem. We can either ignore that light, carrying on our lives as if he had never been born; or we can walk in that light. Following his example and being transformed by him. Showing the world that in Christ and therefore in us God lives on.

And by doing this we help dispel the darkness, and help bring about the changes that will in the fullness of time result in that vision of peace and harmony becoming a reality.

Although troubled by grief and despair at what he saw in the world, Longfellow too reached the same conclusion. The vision can become a reality – when we walk in the light of the Lord, one small step at a time.

His poem finishes ...

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.'*