

## **A sermon given by the Dean at Choral Mattins on Christmas day 2011**

*'Peace on earth and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled.'*

Running through the narratives of the Christmas story – including the Old Testament prophecies which are its preparation – is the theme of peace on earth: God's Messiah would be the Prince of peace; the song of the angels declared a new order which would herald peace throughout the earth.

'Peace' featured – as we might expect – in the preaching of the adult Jesus, but in ways which, at first sight, seem contradictory:

*'Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.'* (Matt 10:34)

And then,

*'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.'* (John 14:27)

But these sayings are only contradictory if we take a soft and sentimental view of peacemaking. 'Blessed are the peacemakers', said Jesus in his sermon on the mount: peace is an activity, not a state of mind.

The contradiction is resolved when we reflect that for Jesus, peace meant, not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love. Peacemaking is a costly business, but – as Advent has reminded us if we have been attentive – it is shot through with hope: the sort of hope that inspired that man of peace, Martin Luther King in his often-quoted speech which comes straight from chapter 40 of Isaiah:

*'I have a dream that one day every valley shall be engulfed, every hill shall be exalted and every mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh see it together. This is our hope...with this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.'*

The coming of Jesus, the Saviour of the world, gives us an opportunity, once again, to recover a sense of the possibilities of who we are and what we might become. It provides an opportunity to let go of the old and receive the new; it enables us to go in heart and mind, as we say, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has come to pass: the cradle of new life, over which looms the shadow of a cross.

It is easy to caricature 'new beginnings' as mere pulpit-talk and cliché, rather like trivial new year resolutions. But at the heart of the message of Christmas is, precisely, God's new beginning. Like Jesus' saying about peace and a sword, it is not, for most of us, simple. Maya Angelou – to my mind another prophet for our time – expresses it like this:

*'History, despite its wrenching pain  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage need not be lived again.'*

That can be true, if we will grasp the possibilities, in our own lives; in the life of a cathedral, a diocese, a nation...our world.

The Jesus whose birth we celebrate today is the Jesus who has lit the way for all the saints, whose presence we glimpse in worship and receive in Holy Communion, the Jesus who mysteriously beckons from the future – whose good news is for all people, for all time.

Jesus is unique. He is the Word made flesh, the fulfillment of prophecy, the Incarnate Son of God, who leaves us his peace and sets us to the task of building his Kingdom here on earth.

This Jesus is human enough to pray, and divine enough that we can pray to him: that is enough for me...

Thanks be to God for this unspeakable gift! A truly happy and blessed Christmas to you all. Amen.