

Peace on earth. The hope of Christmas

This year our church chose as its theme for Christmas

Peace on Earth. The Hope of Christmas.

I thought this was a wonderful theme to explore,

until I connected the dots and realized

that this meant that I would have to speak on it at our Christmas Carols this year!

Speaking about peace in a world as brutal as ours

is a daunting, if not foolish task.

It is a great temptation, as my friend said

to 'draw the veil of celebration over everything'.

But there are some things

that will not allow themselves to be veiled.

There are some things

that tinsel and bon-bons just won't stick to.

A world at war with itself:

The Syrian Civil war

the on-going Arab-Israel conflict

Eastern Ukraine and flight MH17.

And if these seem far away:

the conflict in our families

the battlegrounds of our workplaces

the division in our churches.

But those old shepherds who went to visit the new born

heard the promise of peace

in a world more brutal than ours.

In first century Palestine,

in a world of crucifixions and stonings,

the promise of peace was made.

In first century Palestine there were no cute nativity scenes

clean plastic models of Mary and Joseph, the three wise men

and a little baby Jesus who

when you press his head

will sing Silent Night.

The life of Christ was short and brutal.

But in our hurting anxious world we may still celebrate.

The story about the birth of Jesus in the stable

says something immensely important about our world, and our place in it.

It says God draws near. It says that God cares.

It says that God does not practice border protection.
In the stable
we meet a God who reaches out
crosses the street
waits for the one left behind.

In the stable
we meet a God who loves the widows
and orphans
and tax collectors
and prostitutes.

We meet a God who *loves*
the widow in you and me
the orphan in you and me
the tax collector in you and me
the prostitute in you and me

In the stable
we meet a God who hears the cry of the poor;
And in this
hope is found.

In a world where wealth promises freedom
and power assures influence
the Christmas story
says we might discover our hope in surprising places.

In Jesus we meet a God who bears no resemblance
to an Emperor
or Prime minister
or CEO
or person of authority
or a priest or bishop or minister of the church.

We meet an infant
born of an un-wed mother
frail and dependent
in a stable
among animals
and shepherds
and noise and mess.

The church likes to call itself a 'people of hope' (especially at this time of the year!).
But in truth people are people of hope.

We say 'where there is life there is hope'
but in truth
if there is no hope, there is no life.
We cannot live without hope.

But we can choose
where we place our hope.

I choose to place my hope
in a God who draws near.
I choose to place my hope
in the one born in a stable.
I choose to place my hope
in the Nazarene carpenter
who knew peace within himself.
Peace that made it possible for him
to live a radically simple life
accumulating no wealth
no nest egg
hardly travelling at all
And yet was completely himself (wouldn't we all like to be ourselves!)
speaking truth to power
showing us another way of being human

Christmas reminds us
that real hope can be found in surprising places
that real peace can be found in situations of conflict
and that's a reason, I reckon, to celebrate.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with each of you this Christmas