

Christmass Eve 2016

Peace and Goodwill towards all men. (Luke 2:14 cf Authorized Version)

This was the headline in a national newspaper last Wednesday. Above it a photograph showed a nativity scene being guarded by policemen with what looked like machine guns. I assumed it had been taken in Berlin where there had just been twelve people killed in a terrorist attack. But the police uniforms looked remarkably familiar. I looked a little closer at the text. This was not a foreign church in a foreign city: this was Canterbury Cathedral here in England. A nativity scene in my own country was being guarded by armed police.

I was shocked. I was shocked by the thought that someone might want to make a terrorist attack on Canterbury Cathedral. But I was even more shocked by our response. The presence of armed police at a nativity seems inappropriate. It reflects a degree of anxiety that is not quite right.

I say this on the basis of the Christmas message itself and I will come to that shortly. But I also say it in on the basis of facts, hard evidence. I will take a quick look at that now.

There is nothing new about terrorism. Terrorism has been part of British society for as long as we can remember. In late Victorian times Irish Nationalists bombed the London Underground three times; they made two attempts to assassinate Queen Victoria; they attempted to blow up the House of Commons. In the early years of the twentieth century the threat was from Anarchists – in 1911 two of them were besieged by police and the army in Sidney Street, London: three policemen died as a result and one fireman.

In our own time the most significant threats are not from terrorism but from cars and snow. In the fifteen years since 9/11 there have been in Britain 53 deaths attributed by the Government to terrorism: one was Lee Rigby and the rest were on one day – 7th July 2005 in London. (*House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number 7613, 9 June 2016 Terrorism in Great Britain: the statistics*)

But in that same period around 38,000 people have died in road traffic accidents in Britain. (*Department of Transport Number of fatalities resulting*

from road accidents in Great Britain) This means that I am around 760 times more likely to be killed by a car driver than by a terrorist.

But things get so much worse when it snows. Road deaths have been consistently declining for the last fifteen years. There was one exception when, in 2011, there was an increase of around 50. The Government attributes this to the snow. Snow in 2011 killed as many people as the London bombings of 2005. When you get home you might like to look at all the beautiful snowy scenes on your Christmas cards and reflect that snow is as dangerous as a terrorist. Or if you like your glass half full then a terrorist is to be feared no more than a few days of snow.

What does the Christmas story have to say to the facts? Well, the Christmas story is all about vulnerability. It is about weakness. At the heart of it is a God who could have stayed in heaven. Christians believe and the bible makes is clear that Jesus existed from the beginning of time and made a conscious decision to enter our world and become human being. That was a risky decision.

For a start he could have been rejected by the Virgin Mary. It was not a convincing story that she told: 'I am pregnant because an Angel came to me and said I would have a child by the Holy Spirit.' No one could have blamed her if she had said 'no'.

The second risk lay in his birth – how easily Jesus could have died then or a few weeks later – just one of a huge number of neo natal deaths.

We know that he narrowly escaped murder by King Herod and with his parents became an asylum seeker in Egypt.

But the greatest risk was that as a man he could have been misunderstood. He might even have got into trouble with the law. He might even have been executed.

And Jesus expected his followers to follow his example of making himself vulnerable. 'Take up your cross' he said to them – and us. (Matthew 16:24) When asked whether we should forgive many as seven times he replied 'not seven but seventy-seven.' (Matthew 18:22) He knew that the Jewish Law restricted retribution to 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' (Exodus 221:24) but he told his followers,

Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also

Matthew 5:39

He also knew the Law said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." (Leviticus 19:18) But he said,

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:45

I don't think Jesus was an idealist. I think he was a realist. I think he knew that if you take revenge there will be an escalation. There will be tit for tat. I think he knew that if we all take the line of 'an eye for an eye' then we will end up in a world of blind people. I think he knew that the only way to create peace is to act peaceably.

He also knew that we have a tendency to be anxious. As a response to the anxiety of his time he said this:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ... Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" ... your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 25-33

Paul, writing to the Philippians picked up the same theme:

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

I love that phrase 'be careful for nothing.' It is so counter to everything we hear from the rest of the world. Can you imagine your parents saying that to you when you were young? You are going out the door and your mother says

Have a good evening, John! Don't be careful.

But that is what Jesus says to us. Anxiety is a corrupting emotion. It can destroy those who harbour it; but it can lead them to harm others. Our own Bishop of Leeds has pointed out that although one refugee may have carried out an attack in Germany there are a million others who have not. To refuse to offer asylum to people because there is a one in a million chance they might be terrorists is a response of undue and corrupting anxiety. It is totally out of proportion.

But we need to be clear about the source of this peace, this lack of anxiety. It does not come from human strength; it comes from the Prince of Peace. And there can be no true peace, either in the world or in our own hearts. until Christ is allowed to reign, until, as Isaiah puts it 'his authority' is allowed 'to grow continually.' (Isaiah 9:8) both in the world of politics and in our own personal lives.

I have not been offered an armed guard for our nativity. I don't think it is very likely that I will be. But if I were offered it I would decline it. I would decline because I do not think the facts warrant it. But I would also decline because I don't think Jesus would want it. A God who chooses to become human; a God who chooses to die for his people simply would not want an armed guard.

Have a good Christmas. Do not be anxious about terrorists. And if it snows enjoy it but take care!

Peace and Goodwill towards all men.

N Clews

24th December 2016