Christmas Day 2011

It's a funny old job -vicaring.

Year after year the same stories, and up you jump and try to say something fresh and relevant.

So I thought I'd be utterly self-indulgent this year and simply tell you what, from all the wonderful readings over Christmas, has meant something to me. I guess if it is meaningful to me and I communicate it well, then you might just catch a bit of it!

So I sat down with my bible and read through the lot -all the old familiar texts -most of which I could probably do from memory -expecting that it would be quite an effort to find something exciting.

Well no!

Just get your ears round this:

Of the greatness of his government and ***peace***

there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne

and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it

with ***justice and righteousness***

from that time on and forever.

Jesus being born into this world -as a human being - has a fundamental purpose: to make things better -to restore and heal the world. This is both for us as individuals and for us as communities, as nations.

So how's that going to happen -what's the master scheme?

What's going to make us feel right about ourselves and the world?

What sort of a 'kingdom' might that be?

From the news you'd think that was simple. Get our prosperity back and all will be well. Worse than that -for not only do we still imagine prosperity will make us happy, but we still hang on to the idea that by

living in the West we are entitled to have the sort of prosperity that is massively superior to everyone else's.

So this passage shouts at me.

God's way of living is about **peace and justice and righteousness**.

This isn't a wish list -well it is -but its more than that -its how things have to be if the world is to work.

Peace and justice and righteousness are the core components of, not only the world's thriving but it's very survival.

Peace you'd think would be the easy one -other people's war, violence -so meaningless, pointless. Why can't these people just work out how to compromise?

But of course the problem isn't really ever *other* people's wars -the problem begins with us. How did you feel when you heard a couple of days ago that Argentina and a couple of other South American countries would no longer receive ships flying the Falklands flag? Maybe all those years ago it would have been better to give every single person living there £1mil and ask them to return to GB or accept Argentinian rule? But as a nation we would rather have a war than a compromise -and their young and our young died.

A step deeper -well -what about the lack of peace within you? Sometimes it's anxiety -that state of seemingly permanent worry - about big stuff -the world situation, the fear of poverty. An underlying stress that everything is unwinding, and the things you thought were certain are no longer so.

Bereavement and ill health also rob you of your peace. Perhaps the killer though is relationships. You lie in bed at night and think -'this time I'll actually leave her'. You think -'how can my child treat me like that?' Inside you know that you want to be kind and generous and loving -but what actually comes out is mean spirited and critical –the good you and the bad you at war.

So you see -peace would be wonderful -but we are rubbish at it.

What about justice? It has been a staggering year. The vice like grip on power that defined so many dictatorships around the world has been shaken to the core. The need for justice is a profound human need. There have been acts of staggering bravery and self-sacrifice as ordinary people behaved in extraordinary ways in search of freedom and justice. But again -it's hard -look at Egypt -

As a country and as a church we need to ask some very tough justice questions.

In what way do we think it is just to aim for more than enough, when others have less than enough? How about how we treat our children - the least happy and fulfilled in Europe? And our old people? If you judge a civilization by the way they treat their weakest members -then we are a hugely unjust society -and people will become increasingly rebellious and prepared to fight for what is just.

Within the Church we still have an extraordinary level of hierarchy and entitlement. If you are not male, white and straight then your experience of justice will be challenging. In conversations about women bishops I am often told that this is not about justice -well sorry -ask Isaiah - justice is a core Christian value and without it the rest of your theology is undermined.

So we are left with righteousness. This is all about how we actually live. It's about the things we say we believe in becoming reality. –Loving, honest, generous.

Next week I'm off to the funeral of my uncle Otto. He wouldn't have called himself a Christian -but he was a righteous man. There was integration between what he believed and how he lived –and the person he became was pretty inspiring. The idea of being righteous might seem a silly religious concept -but boy when you see it -it's so clear -it's the way to go -it's how being human makes sense.

So the three big ones -peace, justice and righteousness.

And Jesus came to us as baby -as a human being -to make a difference. –Sort us out….

Well -there's a sting in the tail -because the end of the story isn't victory -it is sacrifice.

Today its all cuddly baby -though truth be told it was more refugee, teenage single mum -but as the story unfolds the real, extraordinary message is that a quality life -well lived -one that makes a difference, changes things, is the life that is selfless.

Selfless not because you feel worthless, but because you have such a profound and internalized sense of your own value that you don't need to step on other people to validate yourself.

Once you know that in the eyes of God you are of infinite value then it isn't necessary to set out to prove that- by being richer, or more successful, or slimmer, or more beautiful than your neighbor.

How that plays out for you at a personal level I can't possibly know.

I've been reading a fabulous book recently which takes as it's basic premise the idea that we urgently and acutely need to feel that we are desired. That's where the basic instinct towards religion comes from. We need there to be a God who loves us even when everything else falls away.

Good parents can give you that as part of the structure of your personality -but it remains fragile all our life long.

Jesus gives us that -and he enacts it – demonstrates it by the ultimate self-giving. There was nothing in it for him -he did it because he loves us -even though mostly we don't love him back.

Then he invites us to try living that way. In a way it's simple. You and me -we are both infinitely loved -so lets love one another. I can never actually be of **more** value than you, nor of **less** value than you. So trying to prove it is simply a waste of time.

On *thought for the day* last week Lucy Winkett was commenting on the statistic that homeless people live on average 30 years less than the rest of us -and she was recognizing the equal worth of each of those people. If we actually got it we'd act differently.

I rather think that this applies at a community and national level as well. If as a country we stopped trying to demonstrate that we were better than everyone else and enjoyed being an equal partner; If we didn't seem to think that if you are rich you deserve a better education and better health care; If we contemplated an economy of 'enough' instead of more than the others. If power was supplanted by sacrifice -well -we might even start experiencing what healthy human living and loving might be like. It would be Christ-like!

So this little baby in a manger is the biggest, most subversive force there is. Forget the occupation at St Paul's –the birth of this child is challenging us to do different. To live under God's priorities of Peace and Justice and Righteousness.

The next few years will undoubtedly see some vast and scary changes - lets vow to be people who help those changes to be changes for the better.

Amen

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