

I don't know how many of you picked up this week on the astonishing international story about a 'Dog earns his stripes'. The Indian farmer, Srikanth Gowda, from Karnataka, in order to protect his crop from wild monkeys painted strips with hair dye, on his golden Labrador Bulbul, to make him look like a tiger. Apparently, the pesky local monkeys who had been attacking his crop, had not been fooled off earlier by stuffed toys acting as scare crows. So in desperation Gowda, turned to man's 'best friend', his Labrador, for help. You can see Bulbul on YouTube – he is becoming quite famous and the other local farmers are copying his master!

But of course, why I was reminded of this story, as it is the *antithesis* of the vision of peace that the Prophet Isaiah delivers. He depicts a kingdom of peaceful co-existence, of nature living in harmony. Not of monkeys being afraid of a dog/tiger,

'The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den'. (Isaiah 11. 6-9). In our world the experience of nature and the animal kingdom is usually antagonistic. If a wolf lies down with a lamb, that poor lamb usually ends up as the wolf's dinner inside him rather than beside him. But Isaiah pictures a peaceable kingdom where predators will cease their hunting and their prey are not longer fearful.

But one of the most artistic illustrations of these verse from Isaiah were painted by an American Quaker and preacher of the 19th Century, Edward Hicks. He was so drawn and fascinated by Isaiah vision he painted the very same scene over 62 – 100 times and was undoubtedly attractive to Hicks and his fellow Quakers not only for its appealing imagery but also for its message of peace. The version of The Peaceable Kingdom I like most is in the Worcester Art Museum, which is just outside Boston. In it, young children play beside an ox who nestled up to lion and a leopard is lying beside the sheep. Hicks has also painted the lion and leopard with the expression of wide-eyed animals looking straight out at us as if saying 'what the heck is going on, is this a new reality?' They seem astonished by this message of peace and co-existence with anyone! Is this the new norm?!

But Hicks also incorporated into the painting into the background a vignette of William Penn's treaty with Native Americans. Penn, as many as you know, was an early advocate of the unification of the colonies. Hicks may have viewed parallels in the two parts of the composition, in as much as Penn, who had introduced Quakerism into Pennsylvania, had also brought about a measure of the peaceable kingdom to that region in America.

Works of art, such as Hick's *The Peaceable Kingdom*, call us to be inspired and they beckon us stretch our imagination on pondering on the vision of the great prophet. It is also possible that Isaiah was using these animals in a metaphorical and poetic manner. The prophet in these verses maybe not just be saying that God, with the coming of Jesus and His rule on earth, will ensure a new harmony in nature. But that this harmony will *alsousher* in a kingdom where hatred and sin no longer creates hostilities, that man will no-longer be pitched against man, nation against nation. This is a critical interpretation as we approach the week in which we have a general election - this message of potential harmony and peace is as important as ever.

But another aspect of Isaiah prophecy is also spelling out the characteristics of a leaders who will bring about – herald into the world such a vision of peace and harmony. We should be thinking not only of the vision of a better future but also questioning what qualities and characters do we seek from great transformational leaders. Both Isaiah and John the Baptist have pointers as to what should be considered. Isaiah talks of 'The spirit of *wisdom* and *understanding*, the spirit of *counsel* and *might*, the spirit of *knowledge* and the fear of the Lord'. (Isaiah 11: 2-3).

The voice of leaders is picked up by John the Baptist. By listening to His 'voice from the wilderness' John prepares us for one who he is not worthy to pick up the scandals, but a leader, a king, whose voice will not be a media-powered voice loudly transmitting on major networks, but an alternative voice, representing the 'other' voice. The one that looks out for the poor, the marginalised, the lonely, the fearful by bringing the characteristics of *wisdom, understanding, counsel, might and knowledge* into His reign.

And what might the leaders in our contemporary world do to achieve such virtues? Re-address the word repent. (Matthew 3: 1-12). Some theologians see that 'For Jews living at the time of Jesus, "repentance" meant a fundamental change in thinking and living'. For the New Testament, this change is a necessary ingredient accomplishing God's plan for peace and salvation. Today we might equate aspects of repentance with humility and authenticity and focus on the marginal.

The leaders at the Madrid Cpp2 might look to Greta Thunberg ,the teenage environmental activist, some believe is a modern prophet. She arrived in Madrid on Friday morning to participate in a march in the Spanish capital, which is currently hosting the United Nations climate summit known as COP25. She is both humble, authentic and speaks for the marginalised. Was Nancy Pelosi showing authentic leadership when this week she said as a Christian she prayed for US President everyday? Were the relative harmonious NATO meetings this week a glimpse of hope for our world diplomacy? And this week we of course have to ask which of our UK politicians will look out for the poor, the marginalised, the lonely, the fearful by bringing

the characteristics of *wisdom, understanding, counsel, might and knowledge* into their leadership vision?

So in summary, while I doubt whether BulBul, the dog/tiger and the monkeys could become friends, (probably not what Gowda wants) but I remember clearly children playing in a river in Nepal riding on the back of a water buffalo which always gave me such pleasure. Peace is possible and was heralded by Jesus's coming into the world. His leadership is a model for us all. Isaiah 11 describes a kingdom where hope, harmony and love are present. And the voices that express hope are the ones God wants us to hear. May we all, politicians, as well, work for this peace, pray for it, know that it ushers into our lives with the arrival of a new governor, king who reigns now and for always. Amen.