

**Advent 2 sermon by Andrew 8 Dec 2019 And a little child shall lead them**

**Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15: 4-13; Matthew 3: 1-12**

**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 last seven days began with the horrors of London Bridge. We're no longer surprised when these things happen, but we're still appalled and we're saddened over lives cut short and grieving parents and all the traumatised innocent people who get caught up in whatever's happened. As one witness remarked in an interview: "I can never unsee what I have seen."**

**We're appalled by the distortion of religion that we see in the young man who perpetrated this terrible violence. As religious people ourselves we know that outrages like this call into question religious belief and religious believers of every kind. So people end up saying: A plague on all your houses! And who could blame them? If faith can do this, then who needs it?**

**But this isn't the faith of Isaiah who goes into ecstasy about the possibility of another way, another vision. He can see Eden restored and human beings in harmony with the whole created order. So the faith – the spiritually and psychologically distorted faith – of the terrorist is not the faith of the prophets, any prophet.**

**It's not the faith of the Uber driver who brought me home one night this week. He was from Afghanistan, a qualified doctor in his own country, and proudly and happily building a life here for himself and his family. The prophet, "peace be upon him" he said, would not recognise faith mixed with violence, a faith that forces itself on others. Islam means peace, he reminded me. "Your Jesus and your Mary are in our Koran. We believe in Jesus and we believe in Mary." He was trying hard to build bridges between his faith and mine, showing how much we have in common.**

**Although he couldn't resist saying: "Mind you, you only have to pray once a week, we pray five times a day." I tried to correct him on that, but I'm not sure he was convinced. But here was a man of faith who did not recognise violence done supposedly in the name of his faith any more than I would recognise some of the horrors perpetrated by the Christian Church down the centuries, and still. We were brothers, and we salaamed each other as I got out of his taxi – peace be upon you.**

**Moments like that give me hope that Isaiah's vision isn't a total fantasy. And if you want that hope and that vision brought right up to date then you don't need to look further than the lives and the legacy of the two young people, Jack Merritt and Saskia Jones, killed last week, both involved in a ground-breaking scheme for rehabilitating offenders and especially young men like Usman Khan, seduced by violent ideologies when they're young, vulnerable, impressionable.**

**They were killed by someone they were trying to help. Could there be anything more paradoxical and poignant and at the same time generous and life-affirming. Greater love has no-one than this. This is the love that looks full into the face of evil and says: d'you know, I'm going to go on loving anyway.**

**Rushing to judgement, a knee-jerk political response might be tempting for some, but Jack Merritt's father knew his son better than this. This what he wrote in the Guardian:**

**“Jack was angry because he saw our society failing those most in need. He was selfless in his dedication to make things right in every second of his life. He lived and breathed fire in his pursuit of a better world for all humanity, particularly those most in need.**

**If Jack could comment on his death – he would be seething at his death, and his life, being used to perpetuate an agenda of hate that he gave his everything fighting against. We should never forget that. What Jack would want from this is for all of us to walk through the door he has booted down, in his black Doc Martens.**

**That door opens up a world where we do not lock up and throw away the key. Where we do not slash prison budgets, and where we focus on rehabilitation, not revenge. Where we do not consistently undermine our public services, the lifeline of our nation. Jack believed in the inherent goodness of humanity and felt a deep social responsibility to protect that. Through us all, Jack marches on.”**

**“And a little child shall lead them.” Jack wasn't a little child, but he was only twenty-five, Saskia twenty-three. If this year has taught us anything, it ought to be something about the prophetic power of the young – their power to show us the truth and their ability to speak truth to power and challenge the powerful as eloquently as any Isaiah or Jeremiah or John the Baptist. Could anyone other than Greta Thunberg have got the world's attention on climate change as she has – in the very face of being scorned by some of the most powerful people in the world.**

**Young people, crazy prophets in camel skin living off locusts and wild honey, carpenter's sons from the despised town of Nazareth. They challenge us all to be true to what we know is true. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” I could hear Greta Thunberg saying that. Bear fruit. Do what you know you should do. Align your lives with what is true and what is best and what is good, and not just with what's convenient or what will make you money or win you votes.**

**Whether you're a politician or anyone – all of us – there's a challenge this Advent. Don't forget the vision. It's true. People are still dying for it. The young see it and announce it to us like modern-day prophets, and all of us need to listen and change the way we think and the way we live, and bear fruit. Amen.**