

Lent Talks 2008 3 War, peace, justice, freedom.

Humans differ from animals in the ability to reason, make informed choices, to place values on things, above and beyond the simple things that animals can do, like choosing between what's dangerous or safe, nourishing or toxic.

Yet, we evolved from animals and resemble them in so many ways. Human crowd behaviour can resemble how herds, flocks, shoals of animals react, individual will over-riden by the mood of people in the group. This can lead individuals to do things which, on their own, they wouldn't contemplate.

We have freedom and choice, yet sometimes we can surrender it, and lose awareness of what it is right and healthy to do.

War is in nobody's real interests yet the world is rarely without them.

Although the causes of war are widely understood, the lessons learned are generally forgotten or ignored in a new crisis situation.

Yet, remarkably the scale and frequency of wars has reduced hugely in the past 30 years, compared to the 50 previous years. Today possibly one million deaths in Iraq is a distressing thought, but in World War One 21 million died. Around 30 million died as a result of Stalin's regime. In World War Two over 60 million died. In the many conflicts around the world post-1945 about 15 million have died as a result of war.

The more the world develops economically and socially, inequity and need reduces and it's less likely force will be used to resolve issues. The same for reduction of violent crime. It doesn't seem like this in Britain now, or the world.

But we're more aware of war and crime today, due to improved reporting.

Whether or not crime is on the increase, for sure, fear of crime is.

The more we have, the more we worry about losing it. Insecurity and anxiety affects more people than ever. Despite our sophistication & accomplishment, fear is a serious and widespread threat to health.

Millions of people work together around the world today, accomplishing great advances in science, travel, communications and trade. It's well established that most people know and understand the benefits of peaceful co-operation. Yet it doesn't prevent violence from breaking out unexpectedly whether it's in Kenya, or streets in Britain. Social improvement is fraught with set-backs, in the rich and poor worlds alike. Managing fear and remaining free and safe is a balancing act we still haven't mastered.

Despite famines and disasters that touch the heartstrings, the past century has seen big advances in nutrition and the treatment of disease with a net increase in life expectancy in all but the poorest of places, It s a by-product of weath created by industrialisation, yet the share of the benefits for four of six billion people on earth are still small compared to the rich two billion. Between the two thirds and the one third, differences in access to resources, health care, education, transport, and means for wealth creation are still huge

With present knowledge and capabilities earth can support double its six billion population, given favourable conditions and co-operation. But, the two billion 'haves' use on average up to six times the resources per capita, producing six times the pollution. We have global warming crisis which unchecked may put an end to life on earth as easily as nuclear war could.

Global warming threatens to make the two thirds world poorer, and rob them of the past century s gains. Shortage of fresh water, even more than fuel will

bring new divisions and create greater instability and danger for all.

Global terrorism relies heavily on tools forged by modern industrial science and technology to wage war on the rest of us, its roots are in the sense of injustice many in the two thirds poor world perceive persist unchanged. The failure of the richer third of the planet to rise to the challenge of justice and equity, mending existing divisions and heading off future ones, nurtures the climate of violence. It's known, but what can be done?

Creative technologies are emerging which can ensure a huge change for the better for the earth's poor to help people to develop on their own terms, rather than rely on handouts or debt adjustments from the rich nations. Making wind and solar fuelled light and power available where there's no national grid, will allow industry and creativity to expand. Means to communicate with mobile phones and internet where infrastructure is poor or non existent, will help trade increase rapidly, and manage crisis. Hundreds of thousands more would have died from the Boxing Day Tsunami, if rescue and rehabilitaiton hadn't been led by phone and internet resources.

You don't need huge western investment funds or industries to make a difference. Give anyone means to grow, take control of their resources, on their own terms, and they'll work to their own advantage. What's most lacking is political will, the leadership that can give top priority to the distribution of innovative resources. Politicians are often less morally socially, technically advanced in their ideas than businessmen and scientists. Politicians are the voice of the herd ruled more by need and fear, than wisdom and vision. How can faith in the future, in both senses, raise a new kind of politician and

governance fit for the challenge?

Our self destruction as a species stares us in the face by one means or another. What can possibly galvanise us to overcome fear and inertia and tackle the truth? It's vital to stop and examine what's meant by the word 'us'. We are what we belong to - families, communities, churches, organisations, regions with distinct languages culture and histories in common. Despite this diversity we can recognise each others' humanity, get to know each other, work together, learn together, when we have to. We know humanity can unite work together with differences and face common problems, but it's a partly realised vision so far. We're not there yet, perhaps because we fear what we might be called on to surrender for the good of all. Jesus said however;

Those who save their lives will lose them'.

Down the ages utopian experiments have striven to unite people for common good. Monasticism, dissatisfied with the spiritual compromises of a workaday world recreated society in remote communities. This resulted in transformation of the social and economic landscape, with people willingly labouring to the glory of God. Where social adventures force rather than persuade people to unite for the common good, they fail. Totalitarian and tyrannical rule in pursuit of ideals has oft been repeated. How hard we find learning from our mistakes! In our time, ability to connect directly with others around the world, to share thoughts and information, to make relationships, has changed how we live. But will it help us avoid the repeated errors of our forebears?

Seeing pictures of earth from space gives a fresh perspective on existence on this planet. It puts our finitude & interdependency unavoidably before us.

People no longer have to believe all their leaders tell them. Now they can talk to each other, test things out to see if proposals will work.

Life in the instant global village means we can learn about others and find our differences displayed to us directly. This may make us more anxious or possibly more curious about others, as we get to know about the lives of others and put ourselves in their place, whether we meet them directly or not. We're still at a distance from being able to live together well with everyone or make common cause to achieve justice and equity for all, and save the planet for the future. But, we're on the move. The more people meet and exchange the more attitudes change. Denial of the dangers of our times is giving way to practical initiatives and an amazing surge of inventiveness with discoveries able to improve our chance of averting crisis.

What the world needs most is clean energy, that won't add to global warming. Renewable wind and wave power generating technologies yet to be seen in action could perform better than energy planners are ready to admit.

New solar cells capable of cheap manufacture can make electricity available in remote poor parts of the world as well as power hungry urban areas.

Huge changes are essential in the way humankind does everything - trade, travel, industrial production as well as consumption, minimising waste and pollution. In the past people acted as if economic growth was a total certainty, and unlimited resources available. We cannot any longer get away with that illusion. Radical change in our relationship to mother earth is the condition for survival. It can happen if and when awareness of the issues becomes universal, when people face the truth together. Global destruction is not

inevitable, neither is destitution. So, where does religion figure in all this?

At their best, they teach the value of moral behaviour, of overcoming evil with good, being good. All revere life and the created order. Uniting to make a better world is agreeable to all kinds of teaching, yet often religion is the alibi for conflict, destructive division and the devaluing of others who don't think like us. High ideals can be conveniently forgotten when there's an excuse, or a pressure that awakens anxiety, or ambition, and persuades people to let their priorities slip.

I don't argue like Dawkins, that religion is based on irrational premises that makes it possible for the religious to entertain violence and evil in the name of God. We know it happens, but faith in God, entails an informed conscious decision to renounce evil and violence, to do good, follow the truth. How can religion resist pressure, and become a source of awareness and conscience? The problem is, faith is often a matter of half-hearted decision ignorant of the true demands, never properly tried. Many, if not most faithful are less than whole people, damaged by suffering they've endured, or inflicted on others. A well lived life of faith educates us, heals our wounds. All of us are in some sense flawed, in need of understanding and healing. Do we strive to improve ourselves? Yes, in our different ways, though not necessarily for the better, or permanently. We remain prone to the regressive influence of the crowd. Can we change for the better? Can we unite for the common good, or is this the impossible dream? Not impossible, I'd say. A kind of vigilant striving lies at the heart of faith-discipleship. Faith that God made us and all things good is meant to shape our attitude to ourselves and the world.

Our experience seems far from that ideal, not least because of humankind's tragic failure to use freedom aright. We seek our own path, either thinking we can ignore or re-negotiate terms with our Maker. Misuse of freedom causes suffering to self and others. There is a right way to be free and use freedom creatively - not alone, but together with others, through dialogue, accepting checks and balances in making relationships. This is how and where real personal fulfillment is found, contrary to today's self-idolising notions.

Sin is the word that sums up the lostness, confusion, injury and rebellion that keep us from God and out of harmony with others. It's the universal malaise suffered by those wounded by failure to exercise freedom in harmony with God's will and purpose. It afflicts us inwardly and collectively from the level of the family to the whole planet. Sin requires healing as much as it does pardon to make us fit for purpose. Putting things right in ourselves and in our world requires the best of ability and courage, and faith in the future, in what we're becoming on the basis of what we know we are.

Faith thrives on the conviction there's nothing wrong that cannot be put right in time with learning, self-application, patience, courage. But, if we don't strive to put things right, to take part in our own rescue, the alternative is extinction. Faith accepts pardon for errors and deliberate wrong doing, receiving it as a permission to carry on striving to do better. God is always re-creating all things, renewing all things. We see this in nature. It applies to ourselves too. God doesn't act without our awareness or co-operation. Making a better world relies on our vision and energy, born from this gift of intimacy with God, the very heart of faith itself.