

“Peace on Earth...” Those three Christmas card words are guaranteed to raise a cynical smile nowadays, and events in America and Afghanistan won't lessen the trend this year. Islamic fundamentalism has put religion in the news. It's understandable when people feel that, if Jesus came to bring peace on earth, he didn't succeed very well.

But that's not new. One immediate consequence of Jesus' birth was the slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem by a despot. The first preaching of the Gospel led to a terrorist counter-movement under a fundamentalist named Saul. Jesus himself, and all but one of his apostles, died violent deaths. It's in that context that Jesus said, "I come not to bring peace, but a sword."

And yet Jesus, unlike Muhammad, never waged a war, and neither did his followers until the confusion of religion and politics centuries later. That is because he did not come to demand submission, but to proclaim good news; that God was offering peace to a world which had always been at war with him.

Did Jesus fail? A look at our world might cause you to think so. Yet there are well over 1 billion people who still take Christ at his word. Why? 18 Christians were gunned down in a church in Pakistan. But why *is* there a church in a country that is 98% Muslim? Israeli bullets ricocheted round the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. But why do Arabs still worship there when they are despised by both Israelis and Palestinians? A Sri Lankan friend of mine this month received death threats from Buddhists for preaching Christ. Why make such a stand?

The answer is this: they're all in it for the peace. Partly, of course, there is hope in Christ's promise of a future world of peace. But wishful thinking can't sustain faith in a world like ours. No, the power of the Christmas message lies in the proclamation that Jesus has *already* made peace with God through his blood, shed on the cross.

Bethlehem Arabs, Messianic Jews, Sudanese slaves, New York firemen, Ugandan AIDS sufferers, Kabul tradesmen, and even Danbury villagers. Whether open or clandestine, prosperous or persecuted, all kinds of people can say from experience: "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this favour in which we now stand."

Peace be to you this Christmas.

*Jon Garvey*