We are certainly living through troubled times at the moment. There is an anxiety and nervousness about our national life which is not surprising given the terrible events that took place in Paris. We like to think that our lives are secure and safe but we are reminded at how vulnerable we all are; but all it takes is one or more people intent on evil and terrible events as we have witnessed can take place. But how do we respond as individuals? On Friday night on the train I see a young man whose hand is covered in blood, blood on his face. “Are you alright?” I ask, he nods, and I get off the train and I tell the guard but keeping walking. Have I done enough, I think to myself? I am a priest: what if he was seriously wounded – was it enough just to tell the guard? As I am coming home yesterday there is a scuffle outside my house in Trafalgar Square. I hear shouts, a fight, policemen running and holding a man down, sirens and police cars, the area cordoned off with tape, mothers turning their children’s heads away from the man pinned to the ground – and a crowd staring. And I too find myself staring. The other night when the man attacked with a knife in the tube station it was reported that while one man risked his life trying to stop him others just stood around filming it on their iPhones. How should we respond?

Yesterday we held the memorial service for the families and friends of those bereaved by homicide. The figures are tragic. This year 17 teenagers have been killed in violent crime in London alone. 185 teenagers killed in London in the last ten years. Like a tsunami the wave of violence does not end with the act of violence, but moves outwards from the epicentre destroying the lives of family and friends of both victim and perpetrator. Yesterday I see the candles being lit by those who fill our church. Each one remembering a life stolen from them by violence, sometimes more than one. Afterwards I speak to a man whose son was killed by someone who randomly punched him in the face and caused a brain haemorrhage from which he died after they failed to diagnose his injury in an overflowing A&E unit. “I can no longer watch violence on television,” he tells me. “I have to walk out the room.” I can understand. I feel the same. Why is it that when our world has the genius to send spaceships to Mars, create mobile phones through which you can communicate with someone living in the South Pacific as if they were next door, transplant hearts, build 800 foot sky scrapers, create a service provider linking the world wide web with 1.2 billion people, create air travel used by more than 3.4 billion people a year – why is it that humanity still seeks to solve its conflicts and differences by killing people with knives, bullets and bombs? It’s such a primitive, inaccurate and barbarically blunt solution which so often exacerbates the violence rather than ending it. The thing that has developed is the sophistication and lethalness of the weapons used. Surely there is a better way. Why is it that after we have been repeatedly told that air strikes alone cannot defeat ISIS and there must be ground troops that can be counted on (which we don’t have) and that we must have a clear objective and exit strategy (which we don’t have), and that it won’t make us any safer, probably the reverse, why is it that the government still votes to drop more bombs on Syria? The same government two years ago were proposing that we bomb the other side? And if we want to show our solidarity with France wouldn’t it be better to help them with the refugee crisis in Calais? Or the EU with those arriving in Greece? It’s not that those who object are pacifists, more that they’re rationalists and need answers that make sense.

Answers that make sense. How is it for example that the front runner for the Republican nomination for President of the greatest superpower in the world thinks that the way to solve the
violence in USA is to ban Muslims from entering the country rather than regulating the sale of guns and ammunition which have been used in 315 mass shootings, 49,509 gun related incidents and caused 12,533 deaths in the USA in 2015 most of which have nothing to do with Islam at all?

“Bear fruits worthy of Repentance,” John the Baptist challenges the leaders of his time. He lashes out at their hypocrisy, their duplicity and corruption. They cannot and will not escape God’s judgment. Don’t think you have a superior right to others or special privilege with God. I am reminded of the man who shouted out to the knife attacker in the underground. “You ain’t no Muslim Brov.” Similarly you ain’t no Christian Brov if your religious rhetoric has no relationship with moral virtues. None of us have special claims on our religion as something to justify or excuse our violent actions, no privileged dispensation because of our nationality, faith, or the colour of our skin. We will be judged by the way we live our lives, by our actions. At St Martin’s we are very good at preaching God’s open handed inclusivity and mercy but perhaps can overlook warning of the terrifying consequences of evil. Evil has a power which can never be underestimated. It generates its own momentum. Violence can become a monster – look at Da’esh, the violence of this barbaric death cult is quite simply evil – like the Nazis, like the Khmer Rouge. Look at Syria, named in our Christmas nativity, the centre of civilisation, a nation of faith, culture and tolerance, where as one Syrian said who came to our Autumn Lecture Programme, “we are not terrorists but lived together, church and mosque back to back in respect and peace”: but look at the tragedy of that nation four years on riddled by bullets, blasted by bombs, smashed into fragments so that no one any longer knows who to turn to or who or which nation to trust.

“What must we do?” the crowds ask John the Baptist. In response John’s answer seems almost unrealistically inconsequential. He says if you have two coats share with anyone who has none. If you have food do the same. Then he calls tax collectors to a new honesty and soldiers to a new integrity. As if such simple actions could change anything. One can almost hear the laughter in the House of Commons: how can you confront the duplicity, corruption, violence of our world with such gentle actions. It’s as out of date and as ineffectual as the Peace Pledge Union or Stop the War Coalition. But John the Baptist does not stop there: he speaks of a Messiah, one who is coming to set free, one who is coming to truly liberate, one who even the thongs of his sandals he is unworthy to untie. And speaking of him he uses language which is apocalyptic and powerful. He says this Messiah will not baptise with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He says he has his winnowing fork in his hand to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. How do we reconcile John’s call to integrity and honest practice with this vision of final judgement? Which is it: little Jesus meek and mild or the great reaper dividing the wheat from the chaff?

Both of them. The vulnerable child born in a manger is also the judge of all humanity. He comes to bring peace on earth and good will towards all. But that peace is not just Christmas lights, sugar and spice and all things nice. This is a peace which as Paul says in today’s epistle to the Philippians, surpasses all understanding. This is the power, the force of peace. Not a non-thing but the power of God’s love capable even of overpowering death itself and transforming the evil brutality of a cross, into the way of salvation. This is the realisation that the kingdom of God is here and among us. The way we share our coat with our brother or sister is the way we love the Almighty Creator of the universe. What we do in our own home, in our own church, to our own neighbour is what we do to the God who is the Alpha and the Omega. And it is here, down here in the stable of our lives that we must be changed. Our Saviour’s dwelling place is our own humanity.

But how may you ask does that answer the bigger problems of our planet. It can’t be just about me – the way I live my own life – it must be about larger movements, nations, peoples, the planet: otherwise my faith is simply ineffectual and meaningless. Well, I want to ask you: was the faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer weak and ineffectual? He was executed by the Nazis but does that mean he failed? Was the faith and humanity of Anne Frank ineffectual? She too died but who lives on? Was
the faith of Nelson Mandela through those years of imprisonment when he discovered what it meant to forgive even his captors: was that weakness? Is Pope Francis weak and ineffectual when he goes to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and preaches about forgiveness and love for enemies in the face of horrendous violence between Christians and Muslims, and announces a year of mercy? Pope Francis who says, “I continue to say that today the revolution is that of tenderness because from tenderness derives justice and everything else.” Are those who long to save our world from climate change weak and ineffectual when even after the failure of the Copenhagen summit they kept on working and exposing and advocating for the needs of the world so that out of the glare of the media the Climate Change talks in Paris have moved on, and even the voices of the smallest nations of the world in the South Pacific have perhaps been listened to? Was Sandra Sullivan twenty-one years ago ineffectual, when struggling to cope with the murder of her own daughter she began a charity to bring together those bereaved by homicide and to find mutual support on the path to healing and justice, and who twenty-one years ago began yesterday’s annual commemoration service at St Martin-in-the-Fields? Was Dick Sheppard ineffectual when all those years ago he began a Christmas Appeal which is still paying attention to the homeless and vulnerable today? All of these were experiments in hope.

Yes, but these are great heroes you may say. I can never do anything like that. Can’t you? Dorothy Cone has been part of this church for more than 70 years and for a good number of them paying attention to the needs of the homeless by helping with the Christmas Appeal answering letters from donors. Come to think of it she is one of those heroes of faith. You have been baptised with the Holy Spirit and fire. Can you not too become part of God’s hope? The dwelling place of God is you and your neighbour. If the world were to end tomorrow what would you do to make God’s love known today? That’s the beginning of peace – peace in you.

Peace on earth and good will to all. Do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy: a child is born for you will find this child wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in the manger of your own life.