

Christmas Message 2012

'The government shall be upon his shoulder' Isaiah 9:6

My friends, it is my joy to greet you this day in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ whose birth we celebrate. I want us today to recapture the sense of awe and wonder which should fill our hearts as we remember the wonderful truth that in the birth of Jesus Christ, divinity and humanity are brought together in one person. In the manger at Bethlehem lies the baby who defies earth-bound logic, but is a source of great joy and hope to every believer because in this child God has spoken. God who is love has made that love manifest in the most profound way by sending his only Son into the world.

Because God is love, he sends his Son not as the Judge, but as the one who makes peace. It is true that when Christ returns in glory to bring our human history to a close he will be revealed as Lord and Judge of all. But at his first coming which we celebrate today, he comes in humility, in the poverty and obscurity of a stable in Bethlehem. He is a king, but he will wear the crown of thorns before he receives the crown of glory because his purpose is to be our redeemer. He is the one of whom Isaiah speaks some 700 years earlier when he foretells the deliverance of God's people through the birth of a child. He says of this son that *'the government will be upon his shoulder'* (Isaiah 9:6) and this government will be a government of peace. He is the *'Prince of peace'* and we are told *'Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end'* (9:7).

We in Kenya need such a Prince of Peace! Five years ago in the aftermath of the 2007 General Election, our nation teetered on the edge of the abyss as politically motivated tribal violence threatened to spread like wildfire. Since then we have enjoyed economic growth and agreed a new constitution, but we have a truce rather than true peace. We are also

seeing the increasing provocation of terrorist violence and some Kenyans put little value on human life. We were shocked last month by the killing of over forty policemen in the Sugata Valley, but the killing of an individual officer in the course of his or her duty has become almost routine.

When we see disorder and violence, it is tempting to look for a human 'Prince of Peace', for a 'strong man' who will impose order, but we know very well from our own history that this is no solution and opens the door to corruption and a culture of impunity. Isaiah says about the promised Prince of Peace that the government will be upon his shoulder, yet it is all too easy for leaders who have little accountability to enrich themselves by placing increasing burdens on the shoulders of the wananchi. Our new constitution should ensure that we do not go down such paths again, but a constitution in itself cannot guarantee peace. There will be no true peace in our nation if there is not true peace in the hearts of the people, and this is something that Jesus Christ alone can give.

So you may say, what is so special about the peace that Jesus Christ brings? The answer is simple – Jesus alone meets our deepest need which is for peace with God. According to the bible the root cause of all conflict and injustice is the sinfulness of the human heart which is in rebellion against God and insists on its own way. But Jesus did not insist on his own way. Even though he was the Son of God he lived the life of a servant and in love humbled himself, suffered under unjust and cruel leaders and died on a Roman cross, all so that we could be reconciled to God. The Apostle John says *'In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins'* (1 John 4:14).

The peace we have with God is not therefore something we can earn or merit. It is the gift of God. Jesus, as both fully human and divine, was

able to do what you or I could never do. Only he, the perfect Son of God, could be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world as our sinless representative and substitute. He truly was the one who was born to die. This is why Christmas is such good news my brothers and sisters. If Jesus came simply to be an example, then that is not good news, because we know that we of ourselves simply can't follow him and keep to his teaching. We need more than that and what God offers us, through faith and by grace, is nothing less than the gift of new life through Christ. Jesus was born physically of the Virgin Mary through the Spirit of God so that we might be reborn spiritually through the Spirit of God.

This gospel of grace is rejected by the proud who want to justify themselves and consider themselves self made men and women, but it is very good news for those Jesus describes in the first of the Beatitudes as 'the poor in spirit' which means those who know their need of God. As Isaiah prepares us for the news of the child to be born, he says '*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light*' (Isaiah 9:2) and people he is referring to are the inhabitants of Galilee who were the first to experience defeat and exile at the hands of the Assyrians in the early eighth century BC. This was a disaster from which it seemed that God's people could not recover, yet it was in this very place that the promised Messiah appeared.

Perhaps some of you here this morning are struggling with a sense of defeat and failure in your lives – you may feel too guilty or ashamed to believe that you could ever really live for God and serve his purposes, but there is no area of our lives that is too dark for Jesus Christ to reach and transform if we come to him in repentance and faith. We are not imprisoned by our past and that gives us the freedom to face the truth about ourselves and make a new start.

Let me also apply this to the life of our nation. If true peace is to be found in Jesus Christ, we can face not only our personal failings and sins without despair, but also those sinful attitudes and ways of behaving which have been blight on our nation. True peace includes putting the past to rest by repentance and faith, not by burying it and trying to forget.

The peace that Jesus Christ gives not only deals with the past. It also gives us a hope for the future. We need to know and fulfil God's purpose for our lives, because outside of his purpose there is no real peace. We are either living for ourselves or living for God. Everyone wants to feel in their old age that theirs has been a life well lived, but the life truly well lived is the life that finds its purpose in God. Now another way of saying that we are looking to fulfil God's purposes is to say that we are under the government of God, that he is the one who rules and directs our lives, and what a wonderful government that is – we under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ who has loved us more than we can ever fully grasp in this life. Listen again to the names with which Isaiah acclaim the coming son '*Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*' (Isaiah 9:6) – what a privilege to be under such government! And that is what God wants for all his children.

To be under the government of Jesus Christ is a matter of the heart and a personal decision for each one of us, but it is also a decision that has powerful social consequences. Let me say it very clearly – if our hearts, minds and consciences are not subject to the government of God, we shall find that the past decades of government by the 'strong man' will be replaced by growing chaos and the breakdown of moral and social order. For instance we will see occupational groups using their economic power for selfish ends more and more while the deceptive sexual freedom that Western secularism is bringing to our culture will make ever deeper inroads with destructive consequences for marriage and family life, which are the building blocks of the nation.

The government of Jesus Christ in the human heart is not just for our personal blessing. It must mean acknowledging him as Lord in every area of our lives so that we honour him in the values we practice; for example, seeing our jobs and careers not just as a means of making money but as vocations through which we serve others and being unswervingly honest in the way we carry out business and finance.

So let us rejoice today in the wonderful and glorious truth that in Jesus Christ we see the invisible God made visible - not merely a good man, but God made flesh, God in human form. It is impossible to truly accept such a truth and not let our lives be transformed by it. My challenge to you today is this – do you know in your personal experience the peace with God that Jesus alone can bring? And if you do, will you serve his government of peace and surrender your life to his purposes wherever he has placed you? On the answers to these questions hang not only your eternal destiny, but the destiny of our beloved nation here and now.

Wish you God's richest blessings.

Merry Christmas!!