

Sunday 9th December – Advent 2

Malachi 3:1-4

Phillipians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

Last Sunday our candle lighting prayer was about daring to hope in seemingly hopeless situations. We thought about the Advent hope.

We looked at the situation Jeremiah was facing – Jerusalem being surrounded by the mighty Babylonians. Staring defeat in the face; looking at the prospect of exile and the end of the nation. A hopeless situation

We saw the message of hope he brought to the people.

That a new king and a new kingdom would be established; that even though the people had abandoned God, God would not forsake them; that he would do something new. That this was not the end. There would be a future.

And we thought about our own world.

The mess, the violence, the mistrust and hatred

And we began to explore what a Christian hope might look like in our situation.

We thought about hope in the coming of Jesus – which we celebrate at Christmas time. We looked at Jesus being an example for us to live by – in terms of his life, his teachings and his selflessness.

But not just hope in this world, also hope in the final coming of Christ- the final defeat of evil by good. The assurance that in the end God and good will win out; this life is not all there is.

But today, this Sunday, the words in our candle lighting prayer are much more personal. (take a look at them now)

They talk about when we feel alone, when we feel abandoned or lost,
When we are simply unable to sense the presence of God with us.
When we can't cope with the things the world is throwing at us
When we can't see a way forward and
When we wonder where is God in all the mess and the mire of life.

And the words we used as we lit the candles gave us the challenge to cling to Gods promises, to trust that he is with us even when we cannot feel it or see it.

Even when everything seems stacked against us.

Because for all of us there come moments in life where challenges seem to be coming from all directions. When one bad or sad thing follows another; and when we feel we can't face any more

Some Christians might interpret such moments as part of the cosmic battle between good and evil. They might say that Satan is attacking them.

Others might simply see it as just the chances and randomness of life in this world. The fact that suffering and pain are simply part of the stuff of life.

Whichever we view it, the challenge of today's candle lighting prayer is for us to cling to Gods promises

That word 'cling' is such a descriptive word. To me it stirs up images of someone clinging on to a branch for their very life.

So what does it mean to cling to Gods promises?

What kind of hope does God offer

And how can we cling to those promises; how can we hang on for dear life to the promises and words of God – especially when it feels he not there.

We've had a bit of a week. Its seems that each day something new, something unexpected has been thrown at us.

You are no doubt aware that Kate's mum died a couple of weeks back, and that her funeral was on Thursday.

Wednesday was the anniversary of my mum's death last year with all the memories and sadness that stirred up

And on Tuesday we had the news from Kate's son Mickey that there were complications with his wife Sarah's pregnancy

And such things don't just happen to us of course, but others too.

Denise and Graham with all Graham's health troubles, happily now back at home albeit on oxygen

Sue Barnard following the death of her brother.

Margaret Foresheew following Desmond's death

Others who are or who have been unwell– like

(ST JOHNS) Lynn, Joyce, Marjorie;

(CTK) Trevor, Bob, Betty and ongoing health issues

Others with family problems ,,

And we have asked, and no doubt others is their situations have asked -
Where is God is all this?

Why does it happen?

where will our hope and help come from? Why us and why now?

So how can we cling to God's promises in these kinds of situations, at these difficult times?

I'm thinking about such promises as

that he will always be with us;

that he will never let us down;

that nothing can separate us from the love of God;

that he knows us inside out and has done since the days in our mothers wombs;

that in all things God works for the good of those that love him.

Wonderful promises, but how do we hold on to them; what does clinging to them mean?

A very religious man was once caught in rising floodwaters. He climbed onto the roof of his house and trusted God to rescue him. A neighbour came by in a canoe and said, "The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we'll paddle to safety."

"No thanks" replied the religious man. "I've prayed to God and I'm sure he will save me"

A short time later the police came by in a boat. "The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we'll take you to safety."

"No thanks" replied the religious man. "I've prayed to God and I'm sure he will save me"

A little time later a rescue services helicopter hovered overhead, let down a rope ladder and said. "The waters will soon be above your house. Climb the ladder and we'll fly you to safety."

"No thanks" replied the religious man. "I've prayed to God and I'm sure he will save me"

All this time the floodwaters continued to rise, until soon they reached above the roof and the religious man drowned. When he arrived at heaven he demanded an audience with God. Ushered into God's throne room he said, "Lord, why am I here in heaven? I prayed for you to save me, I trusted you to save me from that flood."

"Yes you did my child" replied the Lord. "And I sent you a canoe, a boat and a helicopter. But you never got in."

Now that story tells us how not to look for God fulfilling his promises. But it also gives us clues to how we can see God at work;

Often God acts through other people.

If we are clinging on to the promise that God will always be with us, we will probably find that fulfilled in people bringing us messages of encouragement and help; or of people meeting very practical needs; or of people spending time to be alongside us or to pray with us or for us.

If we are clinging on to the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God, we may well see that being fulfilled when others spend time with us showing love and compassion and generosity and so forth; when people demonstrate God's love to us

If we are clinging on to the promise that all things work for good, we will probably find that fulfilled in words of wisdom spoken by people we trust and respect; or words that help us to see things from a different, perhaps more objective, position, or when people share their own experiences of God supporting them through hard times

And of course as an aside, we are not always on the receiving end. We could well be the ones called to be God's presence, or to speak God's words, or to do God's work in particular situations. And it's important for us to be aware of prompting of the spirit so that we can bring relief, bring compassion and bring hope and be hope to those who are clinging.

But back to our own clinging to promises,
There will also be times where we need to be reminded of how God has helped us in the past; how he kept his promises at other times of our lives. A bit like the footprints prayer

And sometimes There may be times when God does send us signs or pictures which reassure us; which show us that he is there and that his promises are sure. These may be something we read or see; some words from scripture; a vision, a dream or a picture. You may well have experienced this

Lots to think on – but I'll finish with a true story ...

Earlier this year when we were in Ethiopia we visited a place called Lalibela. Part of the visit included walking along a pitch black tunnel, where for much of the walk you couldn't see the light at the end. All you could do was feel the floor under your feet and a wall to the right and left. But we had been told by our guide to keep walking forward, and keep a hand touching the wall, and eventually the light would be seen and the end would be reached.

So as we walked, as we felt our way in the dark; as we felt our hand against the side wall, and our feet on the ground beneath us, we clung to the promise that the guide had given us.