

St James – Sunday 15th December 10:30am
Hope

Zephaniah 3:14-end
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

Come Holy Spirit
Fill the hearts of your people
And kindle in us the fire of your love.

I wonder if you, like me, have ever wondered just why the “crowds” went out into the Judean desert to be called “a brood of vipers” and otherwise insulted by John the baptiser?

Maybe he was the latest ‘celebrity preacher’? The hottest gig in town (or desert?). Maybe ‘fear of missing out’ has been a ‘thing’ for longer than we realise!

Maybe they wanted to check him out? See if they agreed with him or not. Work out if he was a ‘good guy’ or a “bad guy”? That’s definitely been a thing since time immemorial.

Maybe they just wanted a day out. And got caught up in the crowds?

Or most likely, as Paul spoke about last week, they went because what they heard in what John was saying, and saw in what he was doing, was that he offered a message of hope. Hope in the dark times of Roman occupation. Hope of the restoration of their identity as a nation chosen by God. Hope for their future.

And maybe we too can empathise with their sense of a world which seemed to be in a bad place... and getting worse. After all, the news seems to be almost unremittingly awful – wars, floods, climate change, the spread of authoritarianism, unspeakable abuse of the vulnerable, economic and social injustice, division into “us” and “them”. I could go on
Some days – especially at this time of year when the nights are so very long, and the days are short, and seem to be everlastingly grey and gloomy,
...some days it can feel that hope is in very short supply. To the extent that we might even find ourselves wondering – what does the word even mean?

What is hope? What does it look like?

Let’s try this as a working definition. “Hope is the vision of a better future”.

For the people who went out to hear John, their hope was in God’s promise of a Messiah, who would set all things right again.

For us, as followers of that Messiah, Jesus Christ, our hope is in the promise of his life, death, resurrection and return in glory

Of his life – of his actions, his preaching, his healings, his love for all. His example of the way God always intended human being to live together, in love, harmony and mutual respect.

Living out God’s Kingdom among us to show us what it looks like.

The promise of his death on the Cross – that God's love has defeated the powers of evil. That all that messes us up and keeps us separate from God has been wiped away, and we can truly be restored to relationship with our Maker.

The promise of his resurrection – that death is defeated, and we can enter into this new life with God. One which begins now and continues beyond our earthly death. Life in its fulness, life in abundance, everlasting life. Where we can partner with God in the power of the Holy spirit, working with him to build God's kingdom here on earth as God always intended for us to do.

The promise that one day God will call time on this creation and make all things new. His Kingdom will be fully established, and we will live in the full presence of God. Not sure what it will be like, but someone once said 'it will be the best kind of party' and I really like that idea! Like we heard in Zephaniah

The Lord, your God, is in your midst....,
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.

A new identity as the forgiven children of God, a new purpose in building the kingdom here on earth, and the assurance of life lived fully in the presence of God.

So yes – we have this Hope. This vision of a better future. And because it is God who promises it, it is the assured vision of a better future. It will happen.

And yes, that is a wonderful, inspiring, glorious hope which we have. In the dark and the drear it keeps me going

But there's a now and not yet about it. We have this assured hope – but it's not yet fully come into being.

So what about now?

How does this wonderful picture of future hope play out into the dreich and the gloom of our daily experience as 2024 tips over into 2025?

So – here's the challenge that we prayed about as we lit the candles at the start of the service. Because this is where we come in

God invites us to partner with him in making that hope - his Kingdom – come, here and now.

There is God's hope for this world – and it's in our hands.

But how? When the needs and the horrors are so great, and we are so small?

Earlier this week I came across a newspaper article and a radio interview, both of which reflected on the idea of hope and provided some really practical responses.

In the first, the author reflected that hope is often located in the tiny gaps between two opposites – blanking out bad news or being overwhelmed by it (we might say, denial or despair), pessimism and optimism, past and future.

In the second, the person spoke of hope not as being a fluffy emotion, but “something much more gritty.”

The combination made me think of hope being like a seed planted in just the right place, which then grows and flourishes.

Hope begins to become reality, when we begin to make it reality

Firstly, by neither denying nor despairing at the sadnesses and the horrors of the world, but recognising and lamenting them, and using those emotions as fuel to do something. No matter how big or how small - do what we can.

Earlier on I said that the news this week seemed to have been almost unrelentingly bad. I said ‘almost’ because – well, Notre Dame. 5 1/2 years (and a global pandemic) on from a catastrophic fire, the cathedral was reopened – fully restored. No one person did that. Sure some had the vision and the know how, others the practical skills, yet others the bravery and training to prevent the fire from being even worse when it happened. All had commitment and dedication. And all did the bit they could do.

We make our hope for the future a reality when we do what we can do.

A smile

Not retaliating

Offering to visit someone lonely, or to do ‘cutting out’ for Messy Church

Recognising that everyone – but everyone - is made in the image of God

Praying.

But there’s a bit more to this. What we can do, may not always be what we want to do.

Maybe this is the point where we especially need the help of the Holy Spirit, for sometimes doing what God calls us to do is really challenging. Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We make our hope for the future a reality when we do the tiny bit we can do. Even if that’s uncomfortable.

Secondly

Hope begins to become reality, when we don’t allow ourselves to be distracted either by the optimism that says “everything will work out ok in the end so I don’t need to do anything”, or the pessimism that says “there’s nothing that I can do that will make a difference” – and recognising that we have a responsibility to do the something that we can do.

We might say: Don’t be put off

Remember the starfish story – a girl was walking along a beach where many starfish had been washed up. As far as the eye could see there were stranded starfish. She began to walk along the beach, picking up starfish and throwing them back into the sea. She worked for hours, and still hundreds of thousands of starfish remained on the beach.

A passerby said “There are too many. You’ll never even begin to make a difference”.

She picked up another starfish and hurled it back into the water.

“Well, I made a difference for that one”, she said.

St Paul’s beautiful encouraging letter to his friends in Philippi, which we heard part of this morning, was written when he was a prisoner in chains, knowing things probably weren’t going to end well for him. Yet he wasn’t put off. He still preached the gospel to his gaolers, still wrote with love and encouragement to the church he had founded.

So – don’t be put off

Make your voice heard

Write to your MP

Sign that petition

Go on that march

Hope begins to become reality, when we’re not put off because we don’t see the final result of what we do.

And finally we begin to make hope into reality....

When we spot that gap between the past and the future – the one called “today” - and recognise that now is the time. When we don’t put it off until – whenever. When we start now.

I have here a packet of seeds. I bought them two years ago. They remain unplanted. I never quite got round to it. They have not grown. Need I say more?

Do what we can (even if it’s uncomfortable)

Don’t be put off

Do it now

And if all that sounds impossible – well it’s not. Lots of this is happening already.

Earlier this week I was working on a leaflet which tells people about just one part of what we do here in Shirley Parish – our social and community activities.

I have to say it was inspiring to see written down all the ways in which we bring hope into this community. Kate C last week spoke of what that looks like when scaled up across the UK. God is already working through us to make a difference...

And yet there is much more to be done.

So – these seeds of hope. Are we going to plant them?

In a minute we’re going to pray, but I have a challenge – to remind us of the importance of actually doing it.

At the back of church there are some daffodil bulbs. Daffodils – a sign of hope. Take one, plant it, care for it, nurture it. If you need help – ask. Sometime we need to work together to bring hope. Watch it grow and feel the joy!

God is trusting us to bring his hope to this community, this country, this world
Are we up for the challenge?

Prayer

O come, O come, Emmanuel
Come Lord Jesus
We have lit the third candle
To receive the light of challenge,

When we are tempted not to do what we can, perhaps because it makes us uncomfortable
challenge us to change.

When we are put off because we can't see how we can possibly make a difference
challenge us to change.

When we are tempted to leave it for another day,
challenge us to change.

As you call us to bring the light of your hope into the darkness,
Help us to respond to your challenge
O come, O come, Emmanuel
Come Lord Jesus