

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> December

Advent Sunday

Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thess 3:9-end

Luke 21:25-36

The news headlines this week have been as cheery as ever ..

- Climate change – past 4 years hottest on record
- Brexit – dismal economic forecasts, division in the political parties, mistrust, false expectations, etc etc
- Knife crime – there seem to be more tragedies each week
- Refugee bullying – the awful story of a Syrian lad bullied at school
- Gambling addiction – and even the news that thousands of children are addicted
- Yemen war – and the ceasefire resolution being blocked at the UN
- Ukraine – and the tension between Ukraine and Russia
- The Rohingya people being imprisoned in Bangla Desh
- To say nothing of the ongoing war in Syria and the continuing refugee crisis and the rise of homelessness and demand on food banks in this country
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Pretty depressing stuff

And amidst all this bad news, one wonders, is there any hope?

Is there any good news?

And if there is, where is it?

All I seem to see is darkness and despair and division.

The words we used this morning as we lit the advent candle seem to ring true loudly and clearly.

- the darkness of our world
- cruelty and suffering
- oppression and inequality
- a world that sometimes seems hopeless ,

And as we lit our candle, we said that we dared to hope

But honestly, do we believe this..

Is it possible bring hope to a such a dark world?

Can we dare to hope?

If we believe we can, are we deluding ourselves?

is there any grounds for such hope?

Well, back in the time of Jeremiah some 500 or 600 years before Christ we have a similarly depressing situation. The people to whom Jeremiah was speaking were in Jerusalem, being besieged by the mighty Babylonian army. There was a threat of capture and exile. Indeed Jeremiah foretold in earlier verses to the ones we read today that this exile would happen. Soon Jerusalem would be miles away; and the very future of the nation would be at stake.

How did it get to this when a few weeks ago in our readings (and just a few kings ago in history) we were reading about the great reforms of King Josiah who had rediscovered the book of the law, and had urged the people to turn back to God.

His reforms were short lived, however. His sons Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim succeeded him. They both turned away from God; His grandson Jehoiachin was next on the throne and he did no better; and lastly Zedekiah – another of Josiah's sons – came to the throne. He again led the people away from God, and even into rebellion against Babylon which led to the siege, and then the exile and the end of the nation as foretold by Jeremiah.

What hope could there be when the nation's very existence was under threat?

Where were the faithful ones; where were the priests; where were those looking out for orphan, widow and stranger?

Where was there any hope?

Perhaps Jeremiah wondered this too;

But he was a prophet who was being called by God to dare to light a light of hope in the darkness and despair that was his world; who was called to bring a message of hope to the people from their God – the God who had not deserted them, even though they had deserted him.

And a message of hope is what his prophecy that we had read this morning seems to be. A light of hope. A dream. A possibility. Life and hope beyond the inevitable exile. A new future. A new beginning.

Lets look at it again

*<sup>14</sup> The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup> In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup> In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'*

In this prophecy of hope, there is a play on words going on, and like so many of such wordplays in the writings of the prophets, we can easily miss it in the English translation.

When Zedekiah became king – his own name was Mattaniah – he took the name Zedekiah – which means The Lord is my righteousness

And here we have that name being used here for the nation of Judah once this new king has come

Its as if Jeremiah was saying – King Zedekiah – you've kidded yourself and the people by saying that you are the one who embodies the Lord's righteousness. But the times are coming when his true righteousness will be revealed. There **will be** a righteous and good king; his rule will be just and fair and he will follow the ways of the one true God. He will bring hope to this land that you have led to despair and destruction so that this nation will truly reflect the Lord's righteousness

These words brought hope to the people about to enter exile. This was not going to be the end. There would be something new and better.

So what about our situation

We talk of a Christian hope – but what exactly is it?

On one level that hope is in the coming of Jesus, of his life and example. The same hope as the passage from Jeremiah which, from our position in history, we interpret as a messianic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus.

On another level the hope is more eternal. Beyond this world. It looks to the end times when God will bring all things together. When, as Jesus says, he will come again in triumph; when the final battle will be fought and good will triumph over evil. It is this that gives us hope in times of mourning; in times of grief. It is this that says – this world, this life, this three score years and ten is not all there is.

And Advent seems a good time to think on these two aspects of hope.

We are now, of course, in the countdown period to Christmas. We can read the signs quite clearly. We see adverts, hear music, put up decorations, buy Christmas trees, receive cards, take part in Journey to the Stable. Sure enough Christmas is coming.

But how can this annual festival which these days seems to celebrate indulgence rather than incarnation become something of hope for us?

We need to remember that we will be celebrating the birth of Jesus, who brought meaning and hope and purpose.

He showed people by his life, by his teaching and by his selfless death a new way of living. A living based on love and compassion; on concern for others rather than looking after one's own rights; on following the true spirit of God's laws rather than slavishly obeying the letter in order to justify oneself .

If ever such a way of living were needed in the world it is now. When obedience to such teaching and such an example could turn the world upside down; could unite people from different races and tribes and backgrounds; could change attitudes and priorities in life; and could turn swords into ploughshares.

And just as an aside - I wonder if anyone else saw in the news this week the picture of the sculpture on display outside Liverpool cathedral. The Knife Angel sculpture is 27 foot high and made up of more than 100,000 knives – either confiscated by the police or handed in to the police. A wonderful illustration of the transforming power of Jesus.

And this teaching, this life, this example of living is a ray of hope. The fact that God himself came to live amongst us to show us his love in practice is surely a beacon of hope in the darkness – for us to follow and copy.

But beyond that; into eternity there is more.

In our gospel reading Jesus is talking about the end of the age; the culmination of all things. It may not be comfortable to hear, but scripture does make it quite plain. There will be a day when he will come again, when the ultimate judgement on this earth will be made; when good will finally triumph over evil. When the righteous and all those who believe and trust in God will be vindicated.

That however much it may look as if the powers of evil are holding sway in the world, this will not be the final outcome. We should not be discouraged

Jesus tells his followers to be on their guard; to watch out for the signs, but also to live his new way of love and selflessness in the meantime. Paul prays that the Thessalonian Christians be strengthened as they wait for the final coming of Christ.

So the message today – as we wait firstly for Christmas and then beyond that for the coming in glory of Jesus – is to stand firm; to be strengthened, to be on our guard, to have hope and to share hope. To follow the teaching of Christ. To offer to the world a new way of living- the way demonstrated by Jesus – in the face of the darkness and despair that the world offers us.

And in doing so to be and to live the hope that we dare to believe in. The hope that brings light to dark places and transforms lives and communities and nations.