

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

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Advent Hope

2nd Dec 2018

Isaiah 40:6-11

Luke 1:67-79

What we have read this morning are some of the many prophetic voices which had dreams and hopes and visions to express to their people, mainly during times of national difficulty. When the people were feeling attacked or oppressed, or powerless, that was when the prophets came to them, with hope and dreams of a better future. They began it in the days of the Judean and Israelite kings and they continued, though not all the time, right up until a few weeks before Jesus' birth. Today we have read words from the voice ascribed to Isaiah and from the voice of Zechariah, Zechariah the priest, the father of John, not Zechariah the prophet with a book named after him.

Hopes and dreams and visions. These can be powerful things, strong forces to motivate a person or a group of people to act. If a girl hopes to be a doctor one day, she will study hard to get the grades in the subjects she will need to go to medical school. If a boy dreams of being a marine biologist, he will learn to be at home on and in the water, as well as working on his sciences. They will be motivated by their dreams and hopes and visions. Dreams inspire actions – that is what makes them different from mere wishes. Wishing is different. Wishing creates a kind of passive optimism that can paralyse people in a happy fog of complacency: “Somehow everything will turn out fine, why plan, work struggle or sacrifice?” This is not a political sermon, but maybe when we live in a time when our country seems to be too often directed by those with wishes but not hopes and vision, we should remember that a real hope is something that calls for and motivates difficult work and struggle.

On Monday the Session was thinking of words to describe the past, present and future of this church. The future words were all very positive! Words like, innovative, all-inclusive, lighthouse, servant,

adapting and in the community. And if these are to be more than wishes, if these are to be words with a bit of hope and dream and vision attached to them, then we need to think about how we can work towards this end.

Sometimes the prophets spoke words of condemnation, urging people to come closer to God and threatening disaster if they did not – that is another way of motivating – but their words which have retained the most power are not the threats but the promises. The words of the prophets still are evocative to us today, especially when they paint a picture of a better way of living, a way of being that has God at the centre of the nation, that has Jesus' kingdom values as the guiding light in life.

As we come into the season of Advent, as we begin to think about what it means that God came to live among us in Jesus, and that he still is among us by his Spirit, so many of the prophetic speeches sing their promises, their hopes and their visions for us. And the words ascribed to Isaiah seem to do this most of all. It was Isaiah who was quoted and referenced more than any other by Jesus and his early followers.

Words like:

*They shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;*

*nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore. (2:4)*

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him...

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them...*

They shall not hurt or destroy

*on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God
as the waters cover the sea. (11:1-2,6,9)
Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
he will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice. (42:1-3)*

Wonderful words, wonderful pictures, wonderful hopes to cling to. And you could add to them Ezekiel's vision of life coming to what seems dead and people's hearts of stone being replaced by living hearts. You could add Malachi's vision of the hearts of parents being turned to their children and children to their parents. Or Joel's dream of the spirit of God being poured out on all people, young and old, men and women, Jew and Gentile. Amos pictures the vivid scene of justice rolling down like a river and righteousness like an ever-rolling stream, while Daniel dreamed of the world's beast-like empires of violence being overcome by a simple unarmed human being, the one like a Son of Man, a new generation of humanity.

But the prophets did not just speak in such a way simply to give a pretty picture in the mind or to say that in the future all would be well. They were not giving wishes but hopes and dream and visions – reasons and incitements to work for these things to happen. They wanted to inspire people to work for justice and righteousness; to live in such a way that hearts were available to God's spirit; to make the effort to have hearts of flesh, capable of loving and being loved. And time and again they lifted up the idea of peace rather than violence and hostility being the centre of God's life in the world.

At this time of year people often ask, “What would you like for Christmas?” Maybe children are asked it more than adults, but the question is in the air. So, what would you like? Are you one of those who say, “Peace on earth,” with a sigh? Or who think that what you would like is for your family just to get on, or for broken relationships to be healed? Maybe your Christmas wish would be for people to see what it is all about. Maybe you just want to get through what is a difficult time for you, with memories of the past that you can’t deal with well.

What the prophets then want to say to you is, if that is your Christmas wish, how are you going to make it more than a wish? How are you going to make it a vision, a goal, something to work towards? If you wish for peace on earth, are you going to just sit and wish it, or are you going to work to help those who seek to make it a reality – supporting those who seek to resolve conflict- whether at an international, or local or family level? My son dropped casually into his conversation this week that he has spent two full days at school being trained in intervention to prevent and stop violence. Now that is a good thing, and part of doing something to bring some peace on earth!

And peace on earth will not come without justice and equity, so maybe your Christmas present to yourself and the world could be to support those who seek to promote this: Aid workers, Amnesty International and others.

If your Christmas wish is for unity in your family and the healing of relationships, then the prophets want you to ask yourself if there is nothing you can do to help this happen? Maybe beginning by looking at your own role in what has gone wrong.

If you just want to get through things, you might find others who need your help, as there is nothing better to get us through a difficult time than focussing on someone else’s needs.

And if you want people to see the real meaning of Christmas, the challenge, obviously, is what are you doing to help them see?

Christmas wishes are just wishes, but a Christmas vision, a dream a hope is something that you will put your back into.

Who keeps the prophetic dreams alive? When Jesus came, he took the prophetic hopes and dreams and turned them inside out and upside down, but he kept them alive – he more than kept them alive: he showed them to mean so much more than anyone had realised. He, the

template of the new humanity, who, unarmed, could and did defeat the empires of violence that threatened and still try to threaten the world. He called his disciples to follow in his way, and so the keeping of the prophetic dreams and hopes and visions rests with us. If the words of the prophets inspire us and stir up longing in our hearts, then it is up to us to follow Jesus in turning the ways of the world upside down and bringing God's peace, and justice and love to a longing and waiting world.

Today we gather around the Lord's table, remembering the radically different way that Jesus had of changing the world – not by power but by meekness. Not by sitting back, but by engaging with people: by loving and caring, by healing and teaching, by being with people when they were most in need. As we take the bread and the wine and remember his death in meekness for the life of the world, for the life of the vision and dream that he lived, let us ask him to make us those who carry forward his work in the world, so that the dream of God's presence is known in reality by all. Amen.