

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts
Be acceptable to you, O Lord our Redeemer
Amen

Introduction

This morning's readings are taken from those set out for the second week of Advent. Last week the worship team led us to explore the theme of Light. Today we consider 'Hope' which both links and further develops last week's inspiring service.

'Christian' hope is a central to our faith but what does that mean to us today? Language is a powerful means of communication and miscommunication. Christian hope at its best is true and unshakable but we can get confused by a world heavily influenced by sound bytes and attention grabbing media where such terms are used glibly to gain our support for an idea and hope can easily become trivialised to be seen as wishful thinking, dreams without substance or ideas like there being 'pie in the sky when you die'! Hope in Christ is enduring, it is for life, 'not just for Christmas'.

In understanding scriptural references to Jesus as 'the Light of the World' we can recalled the phrase so central to the Easter vigil which in Latin is the ***Lumen Christi***, the light from which all light comes. You may well recall the popular Holman Hunt painting of the same name depicting a dark setting of evening or night, Jesus stands at the door and knocks holding a lamp. Jesus, who is both God and man/human, knocks and respectfully waits on an invitation to enter. One painting is displayed in St Paul's Cathedral in London and another in Keble College in Oxford. This is the nature of the God we encounter in our experience. Unlike today when our preferences on media are stored up and analysed with algorithms suggesting adverts for what the media moguls and systems consider we should be interested in spending our money or our attention. Jesus stands and patiently waits on our response, respecting our freedom.

There is much to ponder in seeing the respect for the free will and choice made by the house occupant/s to respond or not or perhaps 'not yet'... In times of darkness, there can be opportunities for deep reflection with less to distract us which can be both challenging and also clarifying as our thoughts, experiences and feelings mingle and are sifted to make sense of our lived experiences. Sometimes we may become aware of areas of inner brokenness and hurts, the roles of our own choices helpful and not so helpful, and things we struggle with: our compulsions, woundedness and omissions.

Whatever the darkness brings, we find comfort in the knowledge that darkness is not dark to God. As Psalm 139:12 '**even darkness is not dark to you, the night will shine like the day, the darkness is as light to you**'. So we have hope, deep and genuine hope in Jesus who respectfully and patiently waits on the threshold of our homes, our very selves on an invitation to enter and bring the 'light of Christ' into our minds and souls calming any fears or anxieties we may have.

Perhaps we are so culturally conditioned to see darkness as bad or maybe even frightening yet within the dark earth we know seeds are planted. New shoots of growth and hope begin to shape and transform into new life unseen by our eyes. We can find the balance of light and dark helpful in bringing a time for activity and a time for rest, as Proverbs reminds us there is 'time for all things'. Indeed we know from the Genesis creation story, that God created all things and separated light from dark, day from night so neither should be thought of as being any less of God's Creation or God's plan and purpose than the other.

Christ can flood our hearts with knowledge and wisdom beyond our own human understanding; compassion to heal each of us and to nurture one another, to gradually transform us to become more Christ-like: generous, loving, kind, finding joy in the ordinariness of life, the beauty of nature and people of deep hope committed to help build the kingdom of God here and now in our personal lives, communities and the wider world. This is something of the work we are encouraged to undertake during this Holy season of Advent as we prepare the way for the coming of Christ. I will return to this in an Advent prayer as I end the sermon.

So what are we to make of today's readings? What insights do we find there to help us in our journey towards the hope filled future God invites us to pursue one day at a time?

The Old Testament, or Hebrew Scripture reading as it may be more properly called, comes from the prophet Isaiah whom we hear a lot from during the Advent and Christmas season for good reason.. In Isaiah, Chapter 11 starting at verse 1 reads: **'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.'** Jesse is the father of King David a hugely significant figure in the history of Israel. We know from New Testament readings that Jesus is a 'Son of David' whose tribal home was Bethlehem ('the House of Bread') so the link to Davidic kingship is clear. This is a kingship established by God, not like the worldly powers of Roman emperors. We know all too well that temporal powers and dynasties rise and fall, but God's kingship or reign is everlasting. This is encouraging.

The rest of this Isaiah passage goes on to explain the counter cultural qualities of leadership of this new ruler, which we understand in our post resurrection reading as Christ the King:

**'The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him –
The Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
The Spirit of counsel and might,
The Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord...
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes...
With righteousness he will judge the needy,
With justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth'**

The reading concludes by returning to point to a time when present conflicts will be resolved: the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard with the goat... the young child will be unharmed by the snake. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Existing divisions and conflicts will cease and 'the

nations will rally to him'. This last phrase looks at God's recognition by 'the nations' – a plural showing God is not just the God of the Jewish people but of all the earth.

The New Testament reading was taken from St Paul's letter to the Romans. This letter is undoubtedly the most comprehensive culmination of St Paul's theological understanding as he prepares to journey to Jerusalem and meet with the other apostles and disciples who knew Jesus during his lifetime. Paul was well schooled in the Jewish law, the Hebrew scriptures: the writings of prophets and the Midrash of his day. He had studied, discussed and was very familiar with the expectation of the Messiah who would be priest, king and prophet. His Damascus experience turned his life upside down as he encountered the Risen Jesus and converted to spreading the Good News of the life-death and resurrection of Jesus throughout the diaspora using his skills, knowledge and commitment to the best of his ability despite personal hardship.

Much like the trees in our children's address today, Paul found the way he envisioned God using him did not work out as he had originally planned yet his writings, witness and missionary zeal has had so great an impact on the early churches developing that Christianity is forever indebted to his efforts.

Paul seems not to have been an easy character to get on with. He struggled to comprehend how the people of God's covenant had largely not accepted Jesus as the Messiah. In Romans, he finally works out a means whereby Jesus is the fulfilment of both the original covenant to the Jewish people and the new covenant to those who accept Jesus into their hearts and homes whether they are Gentiles or Jews, Greek or Roman, slave or free. We can see how in the fullness of time, Paul believed the Jewish people would also come to recognise Jesus as the Messiah and at that time all nations would accept him and there would be this movement of reconciliation of previously conflicting beliefs. Given the many conflicts and increasing divisions we see in our society, communities, country and our world the idea of forgiveness and reconciliation are very much the hopes and aspirations of people of good will and of sincere faith.

In Romans 15 verse 4, St Paul explains: **'For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide, we may have hope.'**

So in Christ, the teachings come to fulfilment and humanity is reconciled to God. Paul then exhorts the Gentiles to praise God and reminds us of the Isaiah verse we have already explored. His blessing for those who follow Jesus is given in verse 13: **'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'**

As we continue to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives and hearts this Advent, we thank God for the hope we have and ask for the hope to believe and trust in God's plan and purpose for our lives and experiences whether in times of light or times of darkness.

In conclusion, I would like to draw this sermon to closure by offering you an Advent Prayer by Joyce Rupp. I hope you may find encouraging. The prayer considers Advent as a time to sort out a nest of our hearts ready to receive the Christ child and reminds us to have 'Advent on our minds'.

An Advent Prayer

Looking high into winter trees
I see the distant nests
Cradled in arms of branches.
Nests: round, full of warmth,
Softness in the welcoming centre,
A circle of earth's tiny goodness,
Flown from the far corners,
Patiently pieced together,
And hollowed into a home.
Nest awaiting the treasures of life,
Simple, delicate dwelling places
From which song will eventually echo
And freedom of wings give flight.
Advent has been on my mind
Prepare the nest of heart.
Patch up the broken parts.
Place more softness in the centre.
Sit and warm the home with prayer.
Gift the Christ a dwelling place.

by Joyce Rupp

Amen

Marion A Murray

BD MA MTh

Let us now take a few minutes to reflect on
what we have heard and thought in the silence of our hearts.