

A flower in the desert

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Isaiah 35:1-10; Song of Mary; Romans 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Today's readings provide some great material for thinking about what we mean by today's Advent theme, which is **hope**.

Most of the time I use this word *hope* as a kind of *wishing* word. I tend to bandy it about quite a lot, often in light or even trivial ways when I say, or think, things like: "I hope that it will rain today"; or "I hope that I'll win Tattsлото, and never have to work again ..." (joke, sort of ...!).

But, of course, we also use the word and idea in more serious ways when it comes to our deeper desires and wishes. We hope our children will live safe and happy lives; we hope that we will get through that major illness; we can hope that world peace may break out. But even such heartfelt longings are still examples of 'wishing' kind of hopes — they express what we would like to see happen in our current lives. They all come out of our existing ideas about what the world is, our expectations about how it works, and how we see ourselves and others.

By contrast, I'm going to suggest that "Advent" Hope is hope of a *different kind*. It's the leap in the heart when some entirely new possibility is glimpsed, or maybe even just dimly sensed, for the first time. It works by not by asking for our desires to be fulfilled, but by changing our expectations and assumptions. The reading from Isaiah gave us the perfect image for this — that of a flower unexpectedly blooming in a desert. Delicate, beautiful crocuses seen in a place where everyone thought that nothing could grow.

To help us tease this out, I'd like us to listen to a story from an unexpected source. The storyteller, Ajahn Brahm, is a Buddhist monk based in Perth who recounts an unusual experience he had with a prisoner to whom he had been teaching meditation in prison. The recording lasts for just over three minutes. I'd like to play it because, if nothing else, this guy is a much better raconteur, than I am, so enjoy ...

"Most of the prisoners who came into my group were in gaol for drug trafficking or selling drugs — they were drug dealers. And these two prisoners — there was one prisoner — when I arrived for the meditation session took my hand and dragged me into the schoolroom. He wanted to show me something. On the board in the schoolroom was all these cards written by kids. He told me that the week before he'd been invited to Jarrahdale Primary School with a mate of his by one of the school teachers. He was a criminal, in gaol because of drug dealing. This amazing teacher in the school got these two druggies, criminals, to talk to the children about drugs. She could have got some psychologist from Perth, some academic who'd done a degree, and had studied other people. That wouldn't have meant a fraction of what these two prisoners did. These two prisoners stood in front of that class of ten year olds and told them what drugs are really like, from their heart — what happens when you start getting involved in this stuff. Of course, I wasn't at that school, but I can imagine the effect on those kids. Those kids would never touch drugs at all. Because those prisoners were talking from their heart — from experience, not as theory. They were talking from their guts, about what happens. They would have communicated.

But the lovely part of this story, was that, like most schools, after the prisoners had left, in the class, get the crayons out, let's write some cards to thank Nick and — I forget the other guy's name — and they had all these beautiful cards pasted on the wall of the school board. "Nick, thank you so much for coming, I'll never take drugs", "Nick, when you're released, please

come and visit again”, “Nick, thanks so much for what you did, we hope you get released soon, pardoned.” And as this Nick, this drug dealer was showing me these cards, first he was just teary-eyed, then he was weeping, just crying his eyes out. That meant so much to him. He’d done something for other people. One of the awful things about being in a gaol is that your ability to contribute to the happiness of others is taken away. You can’t help. You can’t serve, you can’t give, you can’t love. There he had the chance to do that. I met him at Perth airport many years later ... And as I was waiting there, someone put their hand on my shoulder and I turned around and a very sharp suited, obviously doing very well for himself was Nick. I recognised him straight away. And he smiled at me. His first words were “Brahm, I’m still meditating.”

Interesting, no? What struck me when I first heard it a few weeks ago, was how many “Advent Hope” themes were in it.

What could be more desert-like than the heart of a hardened drug trafficker? To ruthlessly manipulate other people, closing your mind and your heart off to the consequences. Just to feed your own addiction, or because of greed. Pulled down into a grey, dog-eat-dog world whose idea of a spiritual experience is the next chemical escape from a reality which seems pretty nasty. Until, that is, you end up in prison, with all that entails.

So, why then did the heart of Nick the drug trafficker soften? The story is probably complicated, as these things tend to be. But here are some speculative ideas.

The first possibility is that the innocent gratitude written in the children’s cards maybe reminded Nick of something. Maybe he got some sense of what he might have been like had he not gone down the path of self-ruin and selfishness. And maybe, just maybe, he sensed there was still another way, another way of living, another way out of hell.

A second possibility is, as Ajahn Brahm (the buddhist monk) suggested, that Nick’s heart softened just by doing, perhaps for the first time in a very long time, something to help other people, and that can be an amazing force for good, including to the person who is doing the good thing. And Nick was, for a change, *genuinely* useful to those kids and probably knew it: only someone with his background could speak with the authority and integrity to maybe save some innocent lives.

Third, Nick was thanked, acknowledged and trusted, which are things that probably doesn’t happen that often to drug traffickers. The teacher’s invitation for him to speak to the class *was* an act of trust. The children’s gratitude sounded genuine. And Ajahn Brahm’s presence to hear his story maybe helped trigger Nick’s awakening contrition.

A fourth possibility, which we Christians might identify, is the idea that grace was at work in these encounters. While Nick may have been ready to change, my sense in listening to the story of that section when his tears developed was that something else was at work encouraging that shift in his heart. And isn’t it interesting that the other prisoner that Brahm mentioned at the beginning of this story (and never mentioned again) did not respond as Nick did? This sort of reminds me of those two thieves on either side of Jesus on the Cross who responded in such different ways to the same circumstances.

And it did not sound to me as if any of the actors in the story — the teacher, the kids, Brahm or even Nick himself, was specifically acting with the purpose of getting Nick to change. But not only did that unexpectedly happen, here are we in Anglican church in Canberra making use of the story! Maybe we underestimate the power of simple kindness and well-intentioned goodness to bring about chains of positive things that flow through the world. While such positive chains often tend not be as obvious or dramatic as the chains caused by bad action, maybe this is because grace works in a humble and, well, gracious, way that does not force,

but seeks to help, manifesting in subtle ways, to which we, like Mary to the message of the angel Gabriel, need to listen closely. The Holy Spirit can blow softly as a gentle breeze.

In today's Gospel, Jesus said to the disciples of John the Baptist "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Nick comes across to me like someone who was inwardly blind, lame and "unclean". He couldn't see where he was going or maybe even why his way of living and being was a problem. Like one stumbling blindly in the dark. And he was inwardly lame too: a drug dealer's whole way of moving through life, or trying to move, seems to me stunted and difficult. And surely Nick was our equivalent of unclean: a man shunned by society as someone beyond the pale — someone no respectable person would touch.

When he read those cards from the children, and cried, he had not yet been healed. But he had started. His heart had started to change. He had heard, really heard in his heart, the voice in his wilderness saying "your current path is not working", stop, turn around, change!

But I am sure this was not easy to do. Even Jesus was driven into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted after his baptism. One of the things I like most about Nick's story was that little twist at the end where Brahm is at the airport and a prosperous looking Nick comes up to him, smiles, and says "Brahm, I'm still meditating". Which to me sort of sounds like, "I'm still on the path towards freedom — I haven't left it, and this really is an achievement at many levels of my soul. But now I can see better than I could, and can walk better, and I am cleaner."

The idea that Nick's story is not over yet may also help answer the question some of you might have been asking yourselves — where is Christ in all this? Well, the Wind blows where it wills. Nick's unexpected new hope and its natural consequences of joy and repentance, were almost certainly the start, not the end of his journey. Mary's great prophetic outburst with the Magnificat came not at the time of Christ's *birth*, but rather at the news of a remarkable *conception*. Advent is the time *before* the birth of Christ when there are signs that the long wait is over.

Somewhere a baby is about to be born in a place where no-one is expecting to find it — maybe in the kind of stable where dwell drug dealers and Buddhists for whom there is no room at the busy inn, (which is what institutional Christianity unfortunately sometimes looks like). The softening, and opening, of Nick's heart surely is a real story of a flower blooming in a desert. Where there previously had been nothing but despair, or maybe just a darkness that did not even comprehend it was dark, there is now some light. A pathway has been prepared for the coming of the Lord.

And the fact that these kind of unexpected, yet wonderful, things can happen to people like Nick, maybe points us to a third type of hope. I bet Nick's "ordinary" hopes in the period prior to this episode revolved around things like getting out of prison, and maybe something nasty happening to his warders ... That his world view, and what he wanted, themselves might change was not on the cards. The idea that what I am hoping for now might need to change, suggests that a strategy in really bad situations might be to try patiently waiting for things to change, expectantly listening out for the unexpected. And given that it is in the nature of all created things to change, this actually seems like quite a common sense strategy for life, as well as being, as our New Testament reading from James suggested, theologically sound!

Yet maybe you are still asking, does all this really relate to us? I'm not a drug dealer. I don't think any of you is likely to be. So without the drama of living a terrible life, is this whole Advent Hope thing really for me?

Well, part of the answer surely is that wildernesses and deserts take many forms. Jesus said to the crowd in today's reading "... What did you go out in the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? ..."

Given Jesus asks the crowd that question three times "what did you go out into the wilderness to see?" it pays to ponder. And yes, it's a very good question. If we really look seriously and deeply into our own inner wildernesses, I am sure that we are never comfortable with what we encounter there. Which is why we prefer soft clothes and palaces and a retreat into our own constructions of reality, and maybe why Jesus also said "and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Our "ordinary" hopes, which I talked about at the beginning, are perhaps pointers to the breadth of our inner vision and the extent of our capacity to love. What do you hope for? Have you sensed the gold glinting in the depths, or sensed the light shining through the crack of a door opened for a brief minute?

To finish, let's listen again to Isaiah's perfect and beautiful summary of everything I have been talking about:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing...
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert...
A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
... it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools shall go astray...
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
And come to Zion with singing;
Everlasting joy shall be on their heads;
They shall obtain joy and gladness,
And [despair] shall flee away.