

Invite others to “Come and See” our hope

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

In all of today’s readings hope is what shines through. In the readings you have Daniel talking about anguish such as nations have never encountered before. You have Jesus talking about wars and rumours of wars; famines and earthquakes; kingdoms rising against kingdoms. Is Jesus a reporter for CNN I wonder? As we look around our world, as we look at our lives, as we look into our very hearts and minds what do we see at times but fragmentation and despair? Yet in the readings there is something else at work.

Daniel rounds off his book of apocalyptic wars and calamities by declaring that the people of God will be delivered - “the wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky and those who lead many to righteousness will be like the stars for ever and ever”. The psalmist declares that despite the trials of life that the Lord will show them the path of life and that in God’s presence the fullness of joy and delights will flow. In Hebrews the writer tells us that because of the sacrifice of Christ we can approach God and therefore life itself “with a true heart in full of assurance of faith”.

And finally in the Gospel Jesus tells Peter, James, John and Andrew that they are not to worry about what is happening around them, about the calamities and problems, but to instead to speak the words the Holy Spirit gives them. In other words they are not to stress about any of the big issues, they are to trust and listen to God and then act. The passage asks us to keep awake and to live in the present. Don’t be stuck in the past, concerned about yesterday; and, don’t be dreaming about the future worried about all that might happen. For God is in control and the Holy Spirit continues to work – guiding us and empowering us.

Hope is the thread that weaves these stories together. Some of you will know the story of Pandora’s box, a fitting story to refer to here at St. Philips. In that ancient myth Zeus was angry over Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and had Vulcan create an evil being whom all men would desire, Pandora. Vulcan did this and

the gods gave her gifts...hence her name, Pandora meaning "all gift". Pandora had a box which the gods warned her never to open but she could not resist and when she raised the lid, all the world's vices, sin, diseases, and troubles flew out. Nothing remained but Hope. Hope, if it is real hope, is not just a futile dream, a pie in the sky hope. But as in the story of my couple and the babies hope is transformative.

Hope is now my new catch cry because I have been racking my brains for a way to talk about what we as a church are on about. This seems to me to be so important. How can I get up here and talk about stewardship if we don't have a meaningful vision of what stewardship is for? How can I encourage you all to take the "Come and See" program into your hearts and invite others to be part of this journey if we don't really take on board what it means to be followers of Christ and have hope that there is a point to the whole thing? I ask what is the church about really? Why do we come along Sunday after Sunday? Is it about habit and routine? Are we just maintaining an institution that is out of date and out of touch? Our vision statement is good but does it inspire us and take us out of ourselves and make us willing to take some risks?

You know I have this suspicion that St. Philips is a bit nervous about the whole evangelism thing. I know for me it conjures up visions of bible thumping Christians conjuring up visions of hell and damnation. Worse it conjures up visions of someone telling others what to believe? Our ideas about evangelism are hedged about by the images and pictures we have in our mind mostly from bad movies and bad theology.

But what is hell anyway?? What ever else it might be I believe it is a life lived in despair where hope has been snuffed out and relegated to the unattainable. Walter Bruggemann, a very famous theologian, worked with other theologians on a new understanding of mission. After studying, surveying all the social statistics, pondering the state of the developed and the developing world they named the prevailing mood of humanity as one of despair. Bruggeman writes: *Despair means literally the negation or dearth of hope. There is a clear connection between the hidden despair of those who have and the open despair of those who do not.* Whether we have or do not have, despair is our common lot.

In the Philippines, a third world country with appalling poverty, I saw this time and time again but where I see it even more strongly is here in Australia, in the so called lucky country. Here our despair is related to a loss of meaning, a loss of viable and life-giving direction. Our despair is built upon materialism and over consumption. We have sky rocketing depression amongst other life destroying ailments.

In all of this the gospel message is as true today as it was two thousand years ago. In Christ there is new hope for a life that is whole and redeemed. In the Philippines, in the community development projects I encountered, it is hope in loving action that brings about real transformation of peoples lives. To transform the injustice, the inequalities, the despair around us and in our hearts we first need hope. In Australia we need the same hope in action to free us from the poverty of hearts numb with having too much and the demands of being too much.

And people at St. Philips are doing hope in action already. When Robyn and her helpers go about their work at Northourne Community Centre you have people who are ever hopeful and not willing to accept the status quo. When David sets up tables at climate change rallies to get people to sign letters to politicians and drags people off to watch “An Inconvenient Truth” you have someone who is full of hope and refuses to let despair win. When you have Joyce, who quietly proclaims what she calls a “simple faith”, you have a hope that shines. When you have a team of people, including the star leader Helen, who work tirelessly to put on the best church fete I have ever seen you have hope at work in hearts and minds. There is an old saying that says “When there is hope then the angels are close by”.

Faith, hope and love are bound together in the Christian worldview and when put into action are powerful transformers of individuals and communities. So where do you get this hope? Anyone who has been in the depths of depression will tell you that you cannot conjure up hope. You cannot make it happen. You can try and think all the positive thoughts you want but it just doesn't come. Hope is rather a gift from God but it is grounded in spiritual reality – the ultimate triumph of hope over despair is the resurrection of Christ from death to new life.

The Christian story does matter. It is a gift we have been given and entrusted with. I defined stewardship last week as is what I do, with all that I have, after I say, “I believe” and using the gifts God has given me to do the work God is calling me to do. The good news of Jesus Christ is **the** gift that we are called to invite others to know and be transformed by. It is the good news where despair is defeated.

The readings today point to the reality of hope in a world of despair and chaos. The hope of God shines in our being, like a small flickering light. The Christian way of life is about being light and salt in the world, grounded in a relationship with the divine, preaching the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is vital, transformative, important stuff. May we find ways to invite others to share in the hope we have. Amen.

