

## ***Season of Waiting***

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Reverend Dr Colin Dundon

Sunday 29 November 2015

First Sunday in Advent, Year C

*Jer. 33.14-16; 1Thess.3.9-13; Lk. 21.25-38*

### **Introduction**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell in 1943 that Advent was like waiting for the prison cell door to open. After years in a Nazi cell it takes little imagination to understand what he meant; all the possibilities that might be beyond it for love, for freedom, for joy for beauty.

A few years ago (2009) the newspapers reported the experience of a young Canadian, Amanda Lindhout, after spending 15 months in a Somalia gaol cell.

“There was very little food...basically my day was sitting in a corner, on the floor, 24 hours a day for the past 15 months.

“There were times that I was beaten and tortured...I think human beings have an enormous capacity to adjust to trying circumstances and it was the idea of coming home, of a reunion with my family, that kept me going in that darkness. I would just try to escape in my mind to a sunny place, usually Vancouver. I'd imagine running around in Stanley Park.” (SMH, 27 Nov 09 p.5)

Extreme examples help us see more clearly what hope is like; how it helps transcend even the most dark despairing place and sets us free even if the outcome is not a good one, as it was not in the case of

Bonhoeffer, who was hung with a piano wire days before peace in Europe.

Advent encourages us to live hopeful lives.

### **Hope is always surprising**

The reading from the book of Jeremiah fits into the story of Jeremiah in the following way. The city of Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonian king Nebuchadrezzar and the people will shortly go into exile. Jeremiah himself is in prison. The people are about to lose everything that has given meaning to their lives – temple, city, king, priesthood, homes, fields, families, friends.

They are about to lose everything that makes them who they are. God seems to be intent on revoking the covenant that gave them hope and identity. God seems silent, absent, preoccupied with judging them for past wrongs.

Yet here, in the book of consolations as it is sometimes called (30-33), Jeremiah offers promise. A new king will arise, a new David, a renewed covenant.

The people wait for that to find fulfilment; it does not come as they expected. The whole of Psalm 89 is devoted to the question and ends with the cry, “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?”

That question reverberates for the rest of their history (until the present). It was the question of Jesus’ day and the question he was answering.

And the answer is a surprise: a humble birth, vulnerability, suffering, a cross, humiliation, death. No armies, no display of violence or coercion, no hatred towards the accursed pagan. The righteous branch that will spring up for David does not seem to be the same as the hope that is the foundation of the gospel message.

If in Advent we think that we await the fulfilment of a fixed, well-defined promise of God, then we only partly understand the deep sense of Advent, of waiting for God. God's coming among us is always a surprise to us.

How surprising it is for his hearers that Jesus predicts the destruction of the Second Temple. It is all so solid. How surprising that he would say that they would see the "Son of Man coming on a cloud". This is a quote from Daniel 7.13-14 where the Son of Man comes on a cloud, that is, for the cosmos to see, into the presence of God to receive vindication and the right to rule. Jesus hearers would have been surprised that the cosmos would see Jesus' vindication. They certainly did not believe it.

So the resurrection was a huge surprise. No-one had predicted that, certainly not in Jesus' world. They were not stupid. Dead was dead.

And the coming of the Son of Man to renew the heavens and earth will be an equally big surprise.

God's comings are always full of surprises. We need to develop finetuned senses for detecting surprises of God. We develop our senses for bull shit but we rarely spend time working on surprise.

Hope always surprises.

## Hope transforms the present

God's promise of hope is always about the present. The promise may look to the future but the challenge is always to live the future in the present.

In Jeremiah it is expressed in terms of righteousness and justice. Paul speaks of joy and love. Jesus urges his hearers to be alert, keeping their wits about them, living out their freedom even in the constraints of their world just like Bonhoeffer.

Waiting is not passivity about the present. Waiting requires that we pay attention. Jesus makes it clear that it is all too easy to get so caught up in economic or security woes, to drug ourselves to death, to numb ourselves so that we cannot feel or see anything that matters, that we lose all strength and will to do anything.

Waiting requires paying close attention to the way in which we organise ourselves and our lives together. We wait passionately and actively. Jeremiah did that from his cell with his message of hope out of exile and the hope that one day would be heard in the streets again. Everything would be reshaped so as to make new life possible.

That is why paying attention to putting things to rights among us is so important, why justice, love and joyful living can never be far from our thoughts.

Waiting means paying close attention to our life together. The beautiful little reading from 1Thessalonians shows what emphasis Paul placed not so much on correct doctrine but on right relationships; relationships based in the righteousness and justice of God that find their expression in joy and love. It was not that the Thessalonians

church was perfect but that they found God's love and joy between each other.

Justice and righteousness, joy and love are the future. The future is a new heaven and new earth with these as central. The church is the place where these are worked at now. That is our role in the world; to bring to view to the cosmos, the future. We are the people of the future struggling with it in the present.

Too often we puddle in the past. We get lost in the present. We need to have some platform to help us transcend both and help us live as the people who will share the beauty and joy of a new creation.

We do that waiting in prayer. That is why the psalm is read today. Read Ps 25. I have made a few notes for you to reflect on.

Our hope transforms the present among us.

### **Hope is grounded in God's word and action**

In the end all hope is as only as good as the one who promises it. The word of an inveterate liar will not have much weight with us. If there was no reality called Stanley Park in Vancouver Ms. Lindhout's courageous facing of her ordeal might have ended differently.

All the promises that Jeremiah makes, that healing will come, that return to the land will happen, that righteousness and justice will be part of the new order, that new life is possible along with a new covenant, all are based on God's faithfulness, love, the certainty of God's word and promise. "The Lord is their righteousness."

Paul says much the same. It is God's action and promise in Christ that has brought about the joy that he has for them, which they share with

each other. God's action in love in Christ drives their love that all Paul can say is that it abounds.

And for Jesus it is the kingdom of God, with all its promise of a new world that is the foundation for hope. The word of that kingdom, promised in Jesus cannot pass away. It remains a sure foundation for living out the future.

## **Conclusion**

Having hope drives the present. Having hope makes us ready for surprises when they come.

Hope stops us becoming victims. Hope transforms us into being agents who will take responsibility for how we live in the present in which we find ourselves.

Hope drives us to look closely at ourselves in the present. We may not be weighed down with drunkenness and debauchery, but our self-indulgence and the vested interest in sustaining our life styles at the expense of others means that we cannot live in surprising hope.

Our advent prayer might be; "Lord have mercy" and "Open our eyes." Amen.