

Advent Hope

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Advent, Year B, 6 December 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT, Australia

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Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3: 8-15a; Mark 1: 1-8

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Advent hope is the fruit of Christian experience. It's a strange sort of answer to the question of human suffering, death and disappointment. How can God allow this to happen? How can believing in God be compatible with so much human suffering, perhaps most poignantly the wrenching agony of bereavement? And where is God when even good people, people of faith, are swallowed up with all the rest, or have to wait interminably for their deliverance?

The best Christian answer to this suffering is the practical witness of patience and solidarity, on the part of loving clergy and lay people—witnessing to a different reality. This is the meaning of pastoral care. No theoretical answer from a

theologian is anything like satisfactory in the face of life's tragedies, traumas and profound dislocations, except perhaps pointing to the fact of a stubborn hope that never seems to fail God's people—which always seems able to renew itself.

This is the lesson of our Old Testament, over many centuries of ups and downs, triumphs and failures, catastrophes and rebirths. Comfort my people says Isaiah, and tell defeated Jerusalem—which has been eking out a much-depleted existence, with the bulk of its people in exile—that the ups and downs of history, the mountains and valleys, will be made smooth, and that the twisted landscape of their hearts, too, will be refreshed at last by the revealing of God's glory. Here the prophet is using topography to point to theology: Israel's faithful God is terraforming a new reality in human history, and in this blessing for humanity God's glory is being revealed.

Israel's answer to suffering and disconnection is to keep rehearsing and developing this story of hope. And hence it's

from the witnesses in Jerusalem, after all they've suffered, that a genuinely credible witness can come, a case for God in the face of suffering that's earned its right to be heard: "lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God'." Friends, this is faith's answer to the challenge of suffering and disappointment: a resilient community with the proven ability to keep hope alive. This is the Church's mission in a nutshell.

So, Advent is good news for a world all too in need of it. Jesus and his great Advent forerunners, John the Baptist and, later, the Blessed Virgin Mary, herald the fulfilling of Old Testament hope, announcing that Jerusalem's travail is ended, that her burden of disappointment is being lifted, and that the bonds of sin stifling human lives and communities are being undone. Mark's gospel today ropes in the prophet Malachi for support, who cries out "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight."

In Jesus the coming one, announces John the Baptist, he and all the prophets will be surpassed. But don't just take my word for it, John the Baptist says; prepare yourselves to meet the coming one and you'll see. John calls for the baptism of repentance, as a precursor to Jesus' bringing new birth in the Holy Spirit. This is a promise of being caught up in God's own life, which offers its own verification in collective Christian experience

So here perhaps is our way into this Advent story. We who've been baptised and who share this hope in Jesus can now wait with expectation as his coming in the world and in our lives is confirmed over and over. Because this isn't just science fiction. It isn't a made-up story, like the beliefs of Scientology cooked up by that science fiction writer and fabulist L. Ron Hubbard. *Au contraire*. Our faith—in Advent, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost—has been worked out, tried and proven in the crucible of Jesus' own life and in the Churches that gave us our Gospels and the other New Testament books. These represent authoritative testimony worked out on the basis of actual Christian experience.

Jesus was the unstoppable reality at the beginning of our movement. Consequently, in light of how eyes were opened, and lives were changed, in light of how Rome's violent pagan empire began to yield to Jesus' gospel of love, Christians gathered their reflections on Jesus' life, death and resurrection in light of the Old Testament in writings that became our New Testament. Hence in light of this new world that Christians had already come to occupy, they crafted Gospel readings like this morning's narrative from Mark of a prophetic forerunner and the great one whose coming he announced. We believe this story because Jesus has already come, and we have seen his glory, and because we know in our collective experience that Christian hope is authentic and trustworthy, despite everything.

The stories may seem fantastic, and many Christians go through a stage of being troubled by them, unable to reconcile them with modern ways of thinking. But the clue is to see these passages as testimony, and as symbol, though they're grounded in actual experience. That way, as we live

lives nourished by word and sacrament, with our imaginations enriched week by week in the Eucharist, we come to make this faith, hope and love more securely our own, over time.

The other face of Advent of course is Jesus' second coming, which is the subject of our epistle today, from 2 Peter. All the apocalyptic themes from antiquity are there, with the promise of our world swept away in a cataclysm of God's judgement. My regular hearers will know that I counsel carefulness in reading such passages. This isn't because the scientific mind can't account for them—these are mythical texts, after all, not literal predictions. Rather, it's because we have to find the truth of them in their symbolism, and especially in the way our New Testament tweaks and challenges the symbolism that it's inherited. This allows us to approach the seemingly bad news of apocalyptic literature with fresh eyes, learning to read it against the grain as good news of forgiveness and hope.

We see this tweaking at work in today's Epistle from 2 Peter. It sets out the standard apocalyptic picture of a world destroyed, but it shifts the emphasis entirely. There's a delay in this catastrophe arriving, but we're told that this isn't to be thought of as slowness on God's part. No, it's intentional. It's to give us all time to be ready, by seeking the fruits of repentance. Whatever final judgement might entail, then, it doesn't have to be bad news for us. We don't have to run and hide from God's challenges as if they're too harsh or too hard for us. Instead, as 2 Peter tells us today, God is patient, and in that patience, in that constantly renewed invitation, we're given the time we need to claim and own our salvation. Hence the old language of apocalyptic is demythologized and repurposed.

Perhaps we best read this apocalyptic language today as a goad to take notice, to realise how seriously God takes our salvation and liberation, and hence to seize every opportunity to get back on board.

So, friends, Advent promises that Jesus will come into every situation to transform it, easing pain by hope and answering disappointment with reassurance. And this forward-looking hope is based on concrete Christian experience past and present.

The truest apocalypse is the one that Jesus unleashes at Easter: an apocalypse that destroys guilt, that cancels shame, that lets us turn our face toward God in confident expectation, and that provides the only ultimately satisfying answer to human suffering.

The Lord be with you ...