

18th June 2017

Isaiah 12.1-6; 25.1-12

The Grenfell Tower Disaster has shocked the nation. Pictures of the tower block going up in flames made for horrifying viewing as thoughts and prayers were for those stuck in the top floors unable to get out and meeting a certain and dreadful death. There have been heartrending stories of those who escaped but members of their own families didn't. There are many who are still searching for loved ones. There is the trauma of those who had to try and rescue people and attend to the victims. There are stories of heroism and the bravery of firefighters.

It has been a huge tragedy. Whether it could have been avoided will be the subject of a public inquiry. Fingers are already being pointed at the cladding used on the tower in a recent multimillion pound refit, shortcuts in that refurbishment and general lack of investment and deregulation of social housing in this country for the last thirty years. There has been reports that the occupant of the flat in which the fire started didn't raise the alarm soon

enough, even wasting time getting his own possessions safe before informing a neighbour.

The reckoning will come, judgement will inevitably and rightly be made in due course. In the meantime grief manifests in anger. The tower is in one of the most deprived wards of the country living cheek and jowl with some of the wealthiest wards in the country. The victims, from many different nationalities and minority ethnicities are some of London's poorest residents. The privileged can buy their safety, their security, their legal representation, and kid themselves that it's because they're clever and know the answers, so they don't have to listen. Many are asking how this disaster can happen in one of the richest countries on earth. Grief, anger, guilt and shame smoulder in the ruins of this tower.

It seems like we lurch from one tragedy to another at the moment in this country. Despite the horror of Manchester bombing, London Bridge stabbings and the Grenfell Tower fire, the response from the general public has been of care and concern and generosity. A year ago exactly Jo Cox the MP for Batley, was stabbed to death in her constituency during the Brexit Referendum. This weekend up and down the country British Get Togethers have been held in her memory and the belief, in Jo Cox's words in her maiden speech in the House of Commons that "we

have more in common than that which divides us". We can but pray that that will remain true and people will work together for the common good in all communities and resist the voices of hate and prejudice.

We are looking at the prophet Isaiah this month in our sermon slot. Last week I said the prophets of the Old Testament were like social commentators of their day. They mixed politics with religion. Isaiah is a complex book written over a few centuries by probably a few authors. It that is a shock to you then come along to my next bible Class on Thursday 6th July and we'll discuss Isaiah then. Most scholars believe the first 39 chapters relate to King Ahaz reign 736-715 BC and then king Hezekiah 715 to 686 BC.

I spoke about the historical context of Isaiah's writing. He was working at a time when the first big Middle Eastern Empire, Assyria, started taking an interest in Judah, and even more in Ephraim. Judah and Ephraim were the northern and southern kingdoms of what is now Israel. So one question the prophet deals with is how to handle relations with the big power and with neighbouring peoples.

Isaiah comments on the tension and clash with other faiths and belief systems. He comments on economic and

political developments in the two nations, and the plight of the poorest and most vulnerable in the land. Finally he comments on people in power and how they use their wealth and power in corrupt and unjust ways.

Both chapter 12 and chapter 25 both contain visions and hopes for the future once judgement and catastrophe are over. In chapters 10 and 11 Isaiah has talked about a remnant surviving after the attack of the Assyrian empire. He can foresee the felling of the Davidic dynasty when Judah falls to the Assyrian invaders, but his vision looks beyond that tragedy to see a new shoot growing from the felled tree. The new shoot in chapter 11 will lack the weaknesses that the Davidic kings have usually shown; he will realize the Davidic ideal in showing compassion for the weak and toughness towards the oppressor. But he envisions a transformed society bringing people together again and bringing healing among the nations. It is of course a reading that is often read out during Advent as we await the celebration of the birth of Jesus. On that day a new song will be sung Isaiah says at the start of chapter 12:

12 In that day you will say:

‘I will praise you, Lord.

Although you were angry with me,

your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.

² Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and not be afraid.

The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my
defence^[a];

he has become my salvation.’

³ With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

The song brings the first major section of Isaiah to a close. You could say that the whole story is contained in these twelve chapters. There has been confrontation, warning and promise and the community of faith is invited to live within this story, facing the challenges of the present but also (when warnings have been fulfilled) living by the promises for the future. Providing the people with a song that they will be able to sing one day is another way of inviting them to live in hope. If they yield to the song, they’re virtually praising God for fulfilling his promises before the fulfilment happens. Wherever they are, they’re invited to see that they can come this far by faith and can continue in hope, not because their faith or hope is big but because the God they trust and hope in is big.

Hope is a precious word.

“Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul

And sings the tune without the words

And never stops at all.”

— said Emily Dickinson, the suffragette who was killed when she was trampled by the King’s horse at Royal Ascot

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness. Said Desmond Tutu

How can we see light and hope in the midst of such a tragedy as the Grenfell Tower Fire? We can hope and pray that the inquiry will reveal what went wrong and hopefully force the hand of the law makers to ensure that lessons are learnt and high rise buildings are safer in the future. But what hope for those who are the victims who have lost loved ones in horrific deaths. If you don’t believe in God, if you have no hope for something beyond this life, then all you’re left with is a huge tragedy. A secular view, an atheistic view is arguably less able to get through adversity and suffering because it believes that this is all there is. All there is, is tragedy.

I went with some of the youth group last week to see the film *The Shack*. It’s still on this week, in the afternoons, at

Cineworld in Gloucester Quays. It is a story of a father whose six year old daughter is abducted and murdered and tells of his long and tortuous journey to find faith in God and joy once more in his life. Not a relaxing feel good film – but a rewarding and thoughtful one.

The father is called Mack and Mack returns to the Shack in the countryside where his daughter Missy was abducted. There he meets with God - all three of them. The book depicts God the father as an Afro Caribbean woman of stature, called Papa. Jesus appears as an ordinary looking Middle Eastern man and the spirit is an ethereal female presence of Asiatic origin.

Mack had had an abusive Father as a child and so he carries a lot of pain and also a reluctance to have a relationship with God, who Jesus called Father. Papa touches on this when she says 'Mack, hasn't it always been a problem for you to embrace me as your father? And after what you've been through, you couldn't very well handle a father right now, could you?'

Mack realises that the way she had approached him had skirted his resistance to her love.

Mack asks why there is such emphasis on God being a Father. Papa replies that once Creation was broken, true fathering would be much more lacking than mothering and

so an emphasis on fathering was necessary because of the enormity of its absence.

In the film Mack has to work out his relationship with God and find healing for his grief and pain. He sees the pain and suffering in the heart of God. The tears of God for the tragedies in the world. The marks of the nails of the cross are evident on all three persons of the trinity. But there is also glimpses of the eternal. He sees his murdered daughter transformed and playing with others and content and happy. He encounters his dead abusive father, understanding the abuse that damaged him and there is opportunity for greater compassion and reconciliation. It is a moving film and a moving meditation on the problem of suffering and the Christian hope.

Our second passage from Isaiah 25 also speaks of grief. Grief is described like a shroud that enfolds all peoples in verse 7. The prophet promises that God will swallow up death for ever and wipe away all fears:

⁶ On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine –
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy

the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
8 he will swallow up death for ever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.

9 In that day they will say,
'Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.'

Where does one look for hope and the fulfilment of these great promises? We still live in a world characterized by oppression, arrogance, hatred, conflict, death, tragedy and mourning. Thus the last chapters of the Bible Revelation 19-22 take up these words, promising a day when God will finally judge the powers, wipe away tears and invite all people to his banquet. Jesus of course brought some anticipation of the vision's fulfilment as well as confirming that its final fulfilment will arrive.

One of life's biggest questions is whether death is the end. Surely if there is a chance it may not be, surely if there is

one who says 'I am the resurrection and the life', then we should try all we can to discover whether this is true rather than just dismiss those claims because it's fashionable to dismiss Christianity.

Here's a story that Rob Parsons tells in his book the Wisdom House, that I used on our Gower retreat last month.

It's about a boy whose parents owned one of the first telephones. They lived on the plains in America and the wooden box with a handle was installed in their farmhouse kitchen. The boy thought it a wonderful machine. His mother would wind it up and say 'Information please' and a lady would reply 'This is information'. He said 'it was incredible. Information please would get you a number, tell you the time and even the weather.'

One day when he was in the house alone he banged his thumb with a hammer. He said, 'there was no point crying because there was nobody in. And then I remembered the telephone. I got a stool, stood on it and reached up to the handset, 'information please' I said between the sobs.

The lady replied in her standard way 'this is Information. How can I help you?'

‘I’ve banged my thumb with a hammer’ I said.

‘Is your mummy or daddy in?’

‘No’

Is it bleeding?’

I turned my thumb over and checked it out. ‘No’

Information please said, ‘can you get to the ice box?’

‘Yes’

‘Hold some ice against it’

It worked! After that I rang Information Please for anything. Information please helped me with my geography homework. She told me where Philadelphia was. Information Please told me how to spell *disappear*. And when my pet canary died and I cried down the phone and said ‘Why would God make something that can sing so beautifully and let it die?’ Information please said ‘Paul, you must always remember there are other worlds to sing in’.

And then when I was nine, my parents moved to Boston. I missed my mentor terribly. Information Please belonged in that old wooden box back at home and I didn’t believe that she could live in the new plastic phone we had now. Yet as

I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never left me. Often in moments of doubt or confusion I would recall the wonderful sense of security I had when I knew that I could call Information Please and get the right answer. I appreciated now how very patient, understanding and kind she was to have spent time on a little boy. I never rang her again... until I was twenty four years old.

I was making a trip one day and the plane put down in an airport near where I used to live. I had a two hour wait so I saw a telephone in the lounge and I thought, ‘I wonder....’ I dialled my hometown operator and said ‘information Please’.

Miraculously I heard again the voice I knew so well, ‘this is Information’.

I asked, ‘could you teach me how to spell *disappear*?’

There was a long pause and then she replied, ‘I expect that thumb is better by now!’

I said ‘have you any idea what you meant to me?’

She said ‘have you any idea what you meant to me? We never had children and I used to look forward to your calls. Silly wasn’t it?’

It doesn't seem silly to Me., but I didn't say so. I asked her if I could call her again when I came back into the area. 'Please do' she said. 'Just ask for Sally'

After that I rang Sally whenever I was in the area and we would talk. One day though I dialled the number and a different voice answered 'This is Information'

I asked for Sally. 'Are you a friend?' the woman said. 'Yes' I replied, 'an old friend'.

There was a pause and the operator said, 'I'm so sorry to have to tell you that Sally died five weeks ago.'

Before I could thank her and hang up, she said, 'wait a minute. Did you say that your name was Villard?'

'Yes'

'Well Sally left a message for you. She said that if you happen to ring we must be sure to give it to you. Paul, you must always remember that there are other worlds to sing in'

Isaiah tells us of a song that will be sung one day. May God give us faith and hope especially in our darkest days

that we may Shout aloud and sing for joy, for great is the Holy One among us.'

Bibliography:

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