**10th December 2017**

**Isaiah 40.1-11, Mark 1.1-8**

A Grandfather went into a bedroom to find his baby grandson jumping up and down in a playpen, crying his eyes out. When he saw his grandfather, he reached out his little hands and cried, ‘out Grandpa. Out!’. But Grandpa knew that the little boy had been put there as a punishment for bad behaviour. So, he said, ‘no son, in, in…’ But the little child kept crying. His plaintive tears and his outstretched hands reached deep into his heart. What was he to do? The boy must have the punishment, but the grandfather was desperate to comfort him.

Finally, love found a way. Grandpa couldn’t take the boy out of the playpen, so he climbed in with him…

Advent prepares us for the celebration of Christmas – when God climbed into our mess to bring us comfort and hope.

The birth of a child is always a sign of hope. It was great to celebrate the baptism of Bronwyn today and have a real-life baby to illustrate that. We must be hopeful to bring a new born into the world.

I read an article in my weekend paper the other week by a mother of three children, all in their twenties now, and she was despairing that she will never be a grandparent. All three of her children have said they don’t want children. The reason is not so much that they want to further their career and don’t want to bear the cost of having children, the time and energy they take, but because they’re pessimistic about the future.

They are concerned for the environment and what we are doing to it and the effects of climate change and global warming that no-one is taking seriously enough to change their lifestyle. They expect to be worse off than their parents because they won’t be able to afford to buy a house and the rise of the robots threaten their jobs. Social mobility is non-existent. The assumption that if you worked hard, got results and qualifications, you’d probably end up with a job and a house is no longer there. You are expecting to contribute to a society that offers very little in return. You will come out of University laden with debt with no incentive to put anything back into society.

These twenty years old felt that that same society had no real respect for the voices or influence of young people. In recent elections the things young people want and vote for are rarely backed up by the rest of the population. Their voices aren’t heard and they don’t feel they make a difference.

Long term family stability is worth striving for but one in two marriages break down and they can’t deny the statistics of doom.

Consequently, these twenty somethings are not very hopeful about the future and don’t want to bring children into it, much to the frustration of their mother who was hoping for some grandchildren.

Advent is a time of hope, because we get ready to celebrate a child being born. A child who would bring hope into the world. The Church’s challenge has always been to find ways of communicating that hope to the rest of the world. Mark at the start of his gospel says this is good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. Sometimes the church seems to be bad news. That’s always a litmus test of our message: is our message good news?

John the Baptist was sent as a herald of that good news to get people ready for the coming of the Messiah. A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the Way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’.

Our world may feel like a wilderness at times. The landscape is barren and bleak, prospects are grim and the darkness gathers round.

Whether it is debt and stagnant wages, relationship difficulties, illness, suffering, death and bereavement – life can seem a wilderness at times. Where is the hope? Where is the light in the darkness?

 Where is the comfort, as promised by the prophet Isaiah?

The word for ‘Comfort’ here in Hebrew is much stronger than in English, and conveys a promise of action, and of hope for the future. It is like a political prisoner unexpectedly being told about imminent freedom on the grounds of an amnesty.

Last week I talked about hope. I suggested that the way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about your future. I shared a story about two men who were captured and thrown into a dungeon. Just before they went into prison, one man discovered that his wife and child were dead, and the other learned that his wife and child were alive and waiting for him. In the first couple of years of imprisonment the first man just wasted away, curled up and died. But the other man endured and stayed strong and walked out a free man ten years later.

I pointed out how these two men experienced the very same circumstances but responded differently because, while they experienced the same present, they had their minds set on different futures. It was the future that determined how they handled the present.

The bible ripples with hope that God will act, God will save, God will restore. You can hear through Isaiah to Mark.

The first Christians had hope.

Do you believe that when you die you rot? That life in this world is all the happiness you will ever get? Do you believe that someday the sun is going to die and all human civilization is going to be gone? That’s one way to imagine your future.

But here’s another. Do you believe in the new heavens and the new earth? Do you believe in a Judgement Day when every evil deed and injustice will be redressed? Do you believe you are headed for a future of endless joy? Those are two utterly different futures and depending on which you believe, you are going to handle your dungeons, your sufferings, in two utterly different ways.

In 1947 the African American scholar Howard Thurman gave a lecture at Harvard University on the meaning of the Negro spiritual. He responded to one of the criticisms of these songs, namely that they were too ‘otherworldly’. And indeed, he agreed they are filled with references to heaven and to judgment Day and to the crowns and thrones and the robes we will wear. The charge was that African American slaves did not need that. In fact, the talk of heaven may have made them docile and too resigned to their condition – Just as Karl Marx famously said that religion is the opium of the masses – it is used by the powerful and privileged to keep the masses under subjugation, waiting for a reward in heaven but not a fair return for their labours on earth.

Howard Thurman responded to these accusations:

‘the facts make clear, he said, that this sung faith did serve to deepen the capacity of endurance and the absorption of suffering…. It taught a people how to ride high in life, to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against hope and to use those facts as raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that the environment, with all its cruelty could not crush…. This enabled them to reject annihilation and to affirm the terrible right to live.

Thurman argued that the slaves believed the Christian faith and therefore knew about the new heavens and the new earth, and about Judgement Day. They knew that eventually all their desires would be fulfilled and that no perpetrator of injustice was going to get away with anything – that all wrongdoing would be put down. And that was a hope that no amount of oppression could extinguish. Why? Because their hope was not in the present but in the future.

Some argued that it would have been better for the slaves to put their hope in some kind of concrete political action – but hopes in our own achievements can be dashed so that hopelessness engulfs us. Hence Isaiah reminding us that

‘All people are like grass,
    and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
**7**The grass withers and the flowers fall,
    because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
    Surely the people are grass.
**8**The grass withers and the flowers fall,
    but the word of our God endures for ever.’

Such is human frailty and the lack of constancy that humankind has no reliable message of hope if it relies only on human resources and outcomes. Instead God will never forsake a people that he has called and formed especially for his glory. Hope in the promises of God can never be snuffed out because it is a certainty – based on God’s action not ours.

Now there were of course many in Thurman’s educated secular audience who believed that while these things in the spirituals were wonderful symbols, you couldn’t take such things literally. But Thurman argued, rightly, that if you can’t take them literally, then they cannot be a real hope.

Imagine you could go back in time and sit with the slaves and say, ‘Now, you know, I’m glad you get a lot out of your spirituals. But if you ever get the chance to go to a good school, you will learn that this life is all there is. There really isn’t a heaven that will make up for all the suffering here. And there isn’t a Judgement Day that will put all things right and address all injustices. But I still want you to live with hope and fearlessness’. You can imagine someone saying, ‘Let me get this straight. You tell me this life is all there is, and if we fail to achieve happiness here and now we never find it at all. And now knowing this, I am still in slavery and supposed to live with my head high under any circumstances. Give me my old hope back! It didn’t depend solely on my political fortunes.

None of us is likely to be thrown to lions and torn limb from limb as people cheer, and probably none of us will experience a life of servitude and slavery – though Christians are being violently persecuted in parts of the world and millions are still trafficked as modern-day slaves today. We may have things weighing us down, but nothing like lions and whips. So, if this great hope helped these other people face their problems, shouldn’t it help you and me with the ones we are facing now?

Christmas is a celebration of hope – because a child was born. God acted to bring hope to this world. The birth of a child brought hope – because although we were far off, we were brought close, as God took flesh and lived among us – he stepped into our playpen - and we saw his glory and his grace. That grace brought us forgiveness, love, and hope of restoration and resurrection.

If the death of Jesus Christ happened for us and he bore our hopelessness so that now we can have hope – and if the resurrection of Jesus Christ happened – then even the worst things will turn into the best things, and the greatest are yet to come when he returns.

We are agents of hope in our society. Jesus calls us to be salt and light. It was not a call to be passive and wait for our eternal reward. We act now to give people the fullness of life, to break the chains of slavery, to work for justice and peace now. But we act in the knowledge and optimistic hope that God will complete and fulfil all we set out to achieve in his name. We have hope because we have the victory through Jesus Christ.

As Paul writes in Romans: **13**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

One of our eldest members Eve Fellowes died a couple of weeks ago. At her funeral last week, I recalled how Eve had shared with me about her faith. In India just before her eldest child Elizabeth was born she was in Lahore Military hospital. Cliff was hundreds of miles away. She went for a walk anxious about the impending birth and coping as a mother. An Indian beggar was sitting in the ditch and called out to her ‘Mam Saab: all will be well’. She felt addressed by a divine voice speaking to her through the beggar.

Many years later, after her husband Cliff died she went into the hospital chapel. The chaplain was there and sat beside her. Eve tearfully confessed that Cliff had gone and she hadn’t realised how ill he was. As they sat in silence Eve said she felt that divine presence again giving her faith ‘that all will be well’. She said she felt, ‘knew’, there was more than just these earthly realities.

That’s not just wishful thinking but grounded in the historical realities of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. May the Holy Spirit give you hope, deep down in your heart, that all will be well as you come to celebrate the birth of a child the Prince of Peace and the bringer of Hope.