

**Advent 3
Sunday 12 December, 2010**

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Hope

Readings:

Isaiah 35. 1-10
Psalm 146. 5-12 (APB)
James 5. 7-10
Matthew 11. 2-11

[Similar readings used the previous Thursday, Isaiah 41. 13-20 & Matthew 11. 7-15]

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The human spirit has much to contend with, in the journey of life. Many wonderful and positive things affect us – and many problems and negative things.

Have you ever been in “the depths of despair?”

I would be surprised if anyone said “no”. We have lived different lives in varying contexts for different lengths of years, so there is not one common life or experience of it, but even if only for a short period, all of us will have had days or longer times when we have been in despair.

Despair usually means an absence of hope. It is one thing to confront a problem or experience something negative, knowing that it will pass quickly or knowing with certainty that we can deal with it. It is another matter entirely – a cause for despair – when we do not experience hope that a situation will soon change or that we can endure it.

When people lose hope, they do sad things, they get ill or depressed or withdrawn, and at the extremes they commit suicide, in marriages they divorce when they see no further hope for the relationship – and so on. When people have experienced great trauma (war, abuse, accidents), they become disillusioned.

[To play with that word for a minute: We all have been disillusioned at times, with people or institutions, it is a very real phenomenon of life. But perhaps we are also sometimes “illusioned” – i.e. we live with the illusion that we will find perfection in a person or situation, this side of eternity. We will not.

Isaiah wrote, as a prophet of God, several centuries before the time of Jesus. It was a time when the Word of God was generally ‘heard’ or experienced via the prophets. Isaiah wrote for a people in exile, far from their own ancestral land and all that was familiar to them from history and much that was important to them in their faith. He wrote, amongst other things, to tell them that restoration *would* come – and it did! The reading for today is headed (not by Isaiah but by Bible editors), “Joy of the Redeemed” or “Return of the Redeemed” – depending on your translation.

He gives pictures that suggest abundance: rivers in the desert, wastelands that are transformed, trees and water in abundance. What is more, God is the initiator, the one who will accomplish it.

I note too that he writes, like prophets did in 'black and white' terms with little 'grey in between', of the Way of Holiness. A couple of points on that:

- He says that the unholy will not be able to walk the Way of Holiness; yet I am reminded of Jesus' words that he came, not to condemn, but to draw all to the Father; and that it is the sick who need a physician, not the healthy – and I'm sure that all of us are in need of the divine physician!
- Good news: he says even the fool will be able to follow the road to God, it will be so clear;
- It calls to mind the stereotype-jokes about women not being able to read maps, or men not stopping to ask for directions; but even stereotypical men and women will be able to find their way! ☺

Part of the point of Isaiah writing as he did, is to give the people HOPE. People in exile, who were in despair, and desperately needed hope.

What would be the point of giving them hope? Hope keeps us going, and keeps us focused; it enables us still to trust; it gives us a wider perspective, reminding us that the circumstances of the moment are not the only circumstances in existence – that there is a wider reality. The bad stuff happening is not the only thing happening!

We too, need hope. That is one reason why inspirational books and speakers are so in demand these days, and even though some may be offering only over-exuberant froth, many others have real substance, which is why they are in such demand.

Turning attention to today's Gospel passage: John the writer makes clear that Jesus IS the fulfilment of the prophetic hopes for a Saviour. He goes on (vv 18 & 19) to say that "the Kingdom of Heaven is arriving, advancing!"

Jesus is doing amazing things. John, in prison, soon to have his head taken off, sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one, or are we to expect another?" Jesus does not give a "yes / no" answer (though John the Baptist was the kind of "yes / no" man who would have preferred such an answer); instead, he refers to what has been noted as happening – "what do you see happening?" – (refer to passage – the blind / lame / cure lepers / good news...).

John may have been unsure if Jesus was quite "the one" – he would have been familiar with prophecies of Isaiah and others, and would have wondered if Jesus was "It", as not everything seemed yet fulfilled... Yet Jesus points to himself as the one beginning to fulfil these expectations.

Advent is a season for Hopefulness, a reminder that even in despair, "this too shall pass". Jesus, a character for real, and for whom there is more evidence of his existence than even many other characters of history, is the One who brings Hope.

I am reminded, further, of the famous words of CS Lewis. He was one of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century's greatest intellects, and initially scornful of Christianity until his own conversion, after which he became a writer and speaker unparalleled in his time. He said (in my own words, rather than quoted directly), something like this:

Either Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, as he claimed, or he is a Liar or a Lunatic. If he is a liar, then he is not a good man, worthy to be followed. If he is a madman, along the lines of a man who says he is a poached egg, even less is he to be followed. But if he is the Lord and Saviour, as he claimed to be, we need to respond accordingly, and not patronisingly refer to him "as another good man" – Jesus did not leave us the option of dismissing him in that way!

We are not Hope-less, but are given renewed hope with a capital H, this Advent. Like the prophet, giving hope to the people in exile, the importance of hope is that it keeps us going, and keeps us focused; it enables us still to trust; it gives us a wider perspective, reminding us that the circumstances of the moment are not the only circumstances in existence – that there is a wider reality. The bad stuff happening is not the only thing happening!

This is a season of renewed hopefulness for our lives, as we live in the Hope that God gives us in Jesus Christ.

Amen.