

WITNESSES TO HOPE

[2ND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER; ISAIAH 6:1-9A, PSALM 4, 1 JOHN 3:1-7, LUKE 24:35-48]

Introduction:

The year is 1879. Charlie Peace, the infamous English burglar and murderer approaches the gallows for his many crimes, his total disregard for human life. It's a small procession, and includes a Priest who 'paints' a vivid picture of the torments of hell in a bid to bring Peace to an appropriate repentance.

The little procession falters and then halts. Charlie Peace turns to the Priest and says these words: "Mr. Chaplin, Sir, if I believed even half of what you believe about hell, I would crawl across the length and breadth of England on my hands and knees. Even if it were strewn with broken glass, to save one soul from that hell that you so glibly speak about."

I remember hearing this story for the first time. I responded with guilt and then evangelistic zeal! I felt guilty about being such an apathetic witness, not doing enough to save the 'heathen' from the fires of hell. Fueled with guilt, I unleashed my evangelistic zeal upon those whose souls I considered to be in jeopardy. How utterly arrogant and unhelpful of me, yet this type of 'witnessing' is common practice for many Christians. Hold on to this, we are going to come back to it.

The Readings:

The text from Isaiah is one of my most loved passages of scripture. I think it paints such a beautiful picture of what worship is all about. In our worship we seek to catch a glimpse of our Holy God of Glory (the whole earth is full of his glory). This necessarily leads us to repentance (woe is me... man of unclean lips). There is an opportunity for us to be forgiven, to have our guilt dealt with (coal from altar touched to his lips... guilt taken away). This Grace then leads us to respond to God in varied ways (Isaiah volunteered to be sent).

We have already journeyed for two weeks after Easter Sunday. However, the Gospel passage recounts events that take place on the day that Jesus rises from the dead. Christ has appeared to Mary in the garden, to the disciples on the Emmaus road, and now Jesus appears to a larger group of disciples. Among other things Jesus says: "You are my witnesses of these things."

Isaiah heard a question from God; “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The disciples heard a statement from the risen Christ; “You are my witnesses of these things.” I believe that God continues to call us to be witnesses... the question is, witnesses of what? Are we to witness to the terrors of hell? Surely not! How would the disciples, to whom this was addressed, answer this question? I think the disciples answer would have centered on Hope, both a personal and corporate hope...

Personal Hope:

Earlier in the Gospel text the two disciples walk alongside Jesus, but do not recognize him. During this walk one of the men says, speaking of Jesus: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel”. They had hoped, but Jesus had been crucified. In order to regain hope, Jesus reveals himself to them and they encounter the risen Christ. In a sense they had to be born again, in the language of today’s epistle, they had to become like little children. Much of our post modern world laughs in the face of such antiquated notions of life beyond the grave. Yet for the disciples this was an undisputed reality, they had seen, touched and experienced the risen Christ, he had eaten broiled fish in their presence. This hope did not fade with the disciples; this has been the faith and hope of the church through the ages, expressed by different people at different times. The well known metaphysical poet, John Donne, expresses this hope so beautifully in his poem, ‘Death be not proud’:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so;
For those whom thou think’st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me;
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and souls’ delivery.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke; why swell’st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death thou shalt die.

Corporate Hope:

However, we do not hope for ourselves alone, or only those who share our hope. We hope also for those who have no hope, for those who despair. Our hope needs to move beyond ourselves to our community, country and indeed the world. Yet how can we retain our hope in the midst of violent crime, abuse, poverty, corruption and injustice to name but a few? The words of Paul Tillich, Professor of Theology at Harvard University, may be helpful as we consider corporate hope:

“The goal of *[humanity]* is not progress toward a final stage of perfection; it is the creation of what is possible for *[humans]* in each particular stage of history; and it is the struggle against the forces of evil, old ones and new ones, which arise in each period in a different way. There will be victories as well as defeats in these struggles. There will be progress and regressions. But every victory, every particular progress from injustice to more justice, from suffering to more happiness, from hostility to more peace, from separation to more unity anywhere in *[humanity]*, is the manifestation of the eternal in time and space.” To borrow language from Jesus, it is the coming of the Kingdom of God. “For the Kingdom of God does not come in one dramatic event sometime in the future. It is coming here and now in every act of love, in every manifestation of truth, in every moment of joy, in every experience of the holy... *[And every time the ANC doesn't get a two thirds majority vote].*”

Conclusion:

Friends if we are indeed the Easter people, if we are the bearers of the great hope of life beyond the grave. Let us not deal in death and judgment, for our hope lies in the life and grace of the Risen Christ!!

I remember very well, a story my Dad used to tell from the pulpit. It was the story of a young man who was utterly broken. For him despair had become a way of life. One day, his pain became so great that he decided to end his life by jumping off a very high bridge in the centre of town. As he left the home he made a deal with himself: if he came across one person who offered him hope, be it a kind word or even a smile, he turn away from the bridge and endeavor to battle on. The question that I leave with us is this: if that young man had met you along the way, what would have happened?