

SERMON ADVENT 1 HOPE

Advent begins! I have felt rather disorientated, having been away, because it feels as though I haven't finished off the last liturgical year. I didn't go to a service celebrating Christ the King last Sunday as I was in recovery mode. The previous Sunday we went to a choral compline at the huge Trinity Anglican Church in Boston. It was one of the most memorable worship experiences I have had, especially coming from an intensely crowded and wordy time at the conference. The main part of the church was dimly lit. The front, the sanctuary if you like, is an enormous gilded curved space which glowed softly, while the sides of the church was held in shadow. The communion table is raised with a tall candle at each side, and there was space all around it. The congregation sat in silence, waiting. Then the choir, dressed in dark robes, filed in almost invisibly from one side and silently stood in an area behind the communion table, where they were hidden from view. There was no officiating clergy. No announcements. The choir, unseen, just began to sing the liturgy of choral compline while the congregation listened, not as an audience, but drawn into it. It was profoundly moving. Mysterious. We came out feeling that we had been offered a different perspective on everything.

Advent is a bit like that. As we use the words of hope, peace, joy and love, words that indicate the core things of human longing, we get a different perspective on things. We have a sense of expectation, of waiting, of preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus again. It catches us up into mystery, when we can draw aside from the more frenetic things of the season and all the pressures of bright advertisements and consumerism. Yet these too, at their best, can capture some of the hope, peace, joy and love with images of smiling family get-togethers and relationships restored.

Today we are focussing on hope, though of course, all these four characteristics are connected. It is easy to look up verses about hope in the Bible. There are lots. Maybe you can call some to mind. Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome is full of them. Perhaps the best loved are these: "Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who

hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently". And the writer of Hebrews says, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen". So, straightaway the connection to the future is spelled out, along with the impossibility of certainty. Just the spirit of optimism. That optimism itself, isn't easy these days. So much of what happens around us doesn't seem to offer many grounds for optimism. When we were in USA we heard so many different voices of despair at what is happening in their country in the Trump era. Political commentary was extraordinarily sharp and outspoken, at least on the news channels we listened to. Bookshops were full of new books that had the name Trump somewhere in their title. Only one we saw was positive, written last year, about Trump being a prophet. Of what, one wonders.

One of the best papers we heard at the conference in Boston was given by Graham Ward, a theologian from Oxford who is an Anglican priest. The theme of the workshop was "Flourishing and Vulnerability". He talked about how he had difficulty with the term 'flourishing'. Of course, he knew what lay behind it, but he said that flourishing was not what the gospel is about. He didn't spell it out, but we know that the call to discipleship talks about taking up our cross and following, even if that cross is followed by resurrection hope. Ward went on to say that most of the Christians he knew were just getting by and could hardly be described as flourishing. Their faith was certainly important; it kept them going through the day and when they went to bed at night, sometimes wondering what the morning news might be. There would not be many of us here who would not acknowledge, at times, that feeling of "just getting by".

The life of faith is just that: the going on day by day, sometimes finding that that is enough of a task. It is a task to which we are called, but, as we go, find that it is only faith in God, made known to us in Jesus, that gives our lives purpose and hope. Yes, there are times of grace, of blessing, of joyous celebration that mark out for us the reality of God's presence. Yes, there are times of confidence, of flourishing and growth, of an understanding of wholeness and healing. These things feed us and allow us to dream, to hope, alongside the times of "just getting by".

Here we are, at the beginning of Advent. Around us the excitement of the season grows, quite apart from the Church, and there is something lovely about that. The atmosphere changes to one where these words of hope, peace, joy and love seem more tangible. So, what is it that enlarges us here, within the Church, as Christians, at this time? Firstly, we are drawn to remember the very reason for our being here: the incarnation of God among us for which we need to prepare and look at ourselves. But this is about more than just ourselves. As we enter this time of waiting and preparation, we are being asked to carry hope in our hearts for the troubled world. This is where we get drawn back to Scripture. The words of the prophets ring out, time and again, calling people back to God, to turn away from the ways of the world that lead to darkness. We hear the voice of Isaiah who looks forward with hope and optimism: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." We are not there yet. There are many dark places in the world. We have to carry in our hearts the suffering of people: those on Manus Island; the mourning of those in Egypt; the struggle of millions in refugee camps; the starving; the homeless begging on streets everywhere; the abused, the grieving; the very earth in its groaning. Yes, we have to name these, and the list could go on and on, because we are not just called to hope for ourselves. We are called to bear hope in our hearts for the world. This is both a personal and a communal journey in Advent. A hope just for our own lives and our own loved ones is not what this is about.

Maybe it seems too much. Maybe it makes us wonder if our faith is really strong enough to carry such hope for the world. I am going back to USA for a moment. At Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, where we were just three weeks ago, the minister was coming to the end of a series on Revelation with all its dramatic and rather horrifying imagery. It was powerful. Afterwards I listened to a podcast of an earlier one in the series which seemed to address so much of what we feel about the world. It was called "The queen and the dragon" and was about John of Patmos' vision in Revelation chapter 12 of a pregnant woman crowned with 12 stars who is about to give birth. A dragon waits to devour the baby but God

whisks the infant away and the woman flees to the wilderness to a place God has prepared for her. Warfare breaks out in heaven between Michael and his angels, empowered by the blood of the Lamb, and the dragon, who is hurled down to earth along with his angels. He continues to pursue the woman but she is helped by heaven and by the earth itself, to escape. This, as the preacher said, is a vivid image of how all the things that most terrify us with the harm they can do, how all that is most evil, is overcome. The victory, ultimately, is with the bloodied Lamb who knows the struggles, struggles that continue. That is where our hope lies. And if we feel vulnerable, this season prepares us to see how God makes Godself vulnerable in order to bring us hope.

That imagery in Revelation seems a long way from where we started, with choral compline, a stillness, a deep sense of mystery. The wonder of it all is that they are not separate. They are inseparable. John of Patmos, as he recorded his visions, was dealing with a mystery that was given expression in images that are hard to understand because they stem from something much bigger. Its vastness encompasses deep darkness and a light that cannot be extinguished. The sublime singing of an invisible choir was also an expression of something far more and lifted us, from the dimness of the church into a place of glowing light.

Somewhere, in this, we place our hope. It is hope that we know lies in something much bigger than ourselves and our own understanding. It is hope, however, that is grounded for us in the power of Love incarnate in our midst which we prepare ourselves to welcome. It is hope that is brought into our midst as we gather around the table to which we bring our simple selves with all our inadequacies and vulnerabilities. Here we are offered the hope that comes from knowing that we are understood, welcomed and held in God's grace. We will gather here and place before God our hopes for Life, for all.