

Hope

In this second week of Advent our topic is hope.

Last week we began with Faith and learned that faith is active. Faith is choosing to act and live in a certain way guided by hope.

Faith is the action
Hope is the Vision.

We hope; because we have not yet seen or experienced that which we hope for. We put our faith into action based on our hopes.

So. What is it you are hoping for?

There will be personal hopes. Hopes for our closest family. Hopes for each other. Hopes for the church. I'll come back to all these.

The season of Advent invites us to raise our gaze above the here and now and reflect on Jesus second coming. Does that in anyway feature in our faith and daily lives and our hope?

The second Sunday of Advent is also, traditionally, the week we recall the prophets.

A prophecy is knowledge about what will happen in the future, spoken now. Most frequently in the Old Testament the prophets are having to deliver a message of the starkest and bleakest kind. But their prophetic message was not without hope.

Our first reading was from Zephaniah. Zephaniah was a young man, possibly early 20's and his rhetoric is apocalyptic. He was descended from King Hezekiah which is probably mentioned because his father was Cushti, meaning Ethiopian, so he was mixed race, his royal connection would give him credibility.

A prophet is someone moved powerfully by the Holy Spirit. They take in the landscape of politics, religion, people's behaviour, most particularly the degree to which people are following or turning away from God – and what they speak is a distillation of all they know PLUS things they cannot know unless God reveals it.

Zephania is speaking about the disaster to come upon Judah and the exile, all of which happens when Babylon invades around 597 BC. But he is speaking nearly 30 years earlier. Here is a flavour of his apocalyptic rhetoric.

⁴“I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all who live in Jerusalem.
I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place,
the very names of the idolatrous priests—
⁵those who bow down on the roofs
to worship the starry host,
those who bow down and swear by the Lord
and who also swear by Molek,^[b]
⁶those who turn back from following the Lord
and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him.”

WOW. He is speaking against those who worship Canaanite gods and syncretism that is worshipping both Yahweh and local gods and he makes clear that the troubles to come are from turning away from God, making alliances with other nations, trusting in those alliances and idol worship.

Of course, he is only seen to be a true prophet 30 years later when it all happens. Only a very few took notice at the time and turned again to God...but that was important, because his words are not without hope. The troubles and exile will also purify those who stay faithful, and for them is very great reward.

Hope

The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;
never again will you fear any harm.

¹⁶ On that day

they will say to Jerusalem,

“Do not fear, Zion;

do not let your hands hang limp.

¹⁷ The Lord your God is with you,

the Mighty Warrior who saves.

He will take great delight in you;

in his love he will no longer rebuke you,

but will rejoice over you with singing.”

The song we shall have at Communion is based on this passage.

What a picture, and what a hope. The Lord God singing over his people, blessing and comforting and restoring and protecting.

Our second reading was from Micah who lived during the reign of Hezekiah, so four generations before Zephaniah. His prophecy alternates between oracles of doom and oracles of hope. The doom is the fall of Samaria which happened in 722BC, the hope? Well there are two parts to that. Firstly, that God loves to pardon those who are penitent, and secondly that even though the kingdom of David appears to end, one will come who is far greater. This reading is familiar to us from Carol services.

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,

though you are small among the clans of Judah,

out of you will come for me

one who will be ruler over Israel,

whose origins are from of old,

from ancient times.”

Micah’s prophecy was again about 30 years before the fall of Samaria, but as much as 750 years before the birth of Jesus in

Bethlehem. It was the prophecy of Micah that the scholars looked up to advise the Wise men before sending them from King Herod to Bethlehem.

What can we learn from dwelling on these ancient things?

In Hebrews chapter 11 it says, now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

What are you hoping for?

Personal hopes. For family. For each other. Hopes for the church.

All of these. But it’s not so much the specific detail of what we are hoping for that matters as much as who we are hoping in.

The huge sweep of the bible narrative, of prophecy and fulfilment show us that God is faithful to his promises. Our hope is in a faithful God.

There is the hope of salvation for all who call on the name of the Lord.

There is hope for those who long for God’s kingdom and whose motivation is love.

There is hope for those who worry. Jesus says – seek first the kingdom and righteousness - all these other things we worry about, our heavenly Father knows just what you need.

There is hope for those who pray, with words, without words, with longing, with dreams. There is hope for relationships, health, work, families, business. God was faithful in that past to his people, and he will be faithful now.

Hope

And there is hope for the end of this life. My Mother has been thinking about what comes next. She said this:

"I think I will fall on my knees before the Lord, and he will take my hand and lift me up, and I will be overwhelmed with the wonder and the grace of it."

She has no anxiety or fear. Her hope is in the Lord who has been and is faithful.

In the same way that a log fire, a warming beverage and the chance to dry out and get warm can keep a weary traveller plodding on through the wind and rain, so the hope of life eternal and the fulfilment of God's kingdom can inspire us to live by faith, be known by love and by the light of hope to others.

Nothing is as we want it to be. The heart of it is who we hope in, not what we hope for. To limit our God with a list of hopes is to treat Jesus like Santa Claus – can you fix this, do that and provide the other?

Our hope is in a faithful God who already knows all our needs. As we see his hand at work in all those things that concern us, so we realise just how great is his love for those who fear him.

I'll close by quoting the second verse of the hymn we will sing in a moment. Be still my Soul.

Be still, my soul, thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as He has the past
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake
All now mysterious shall be bright at last
Be still, my soul, the waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 5 December 2021