

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

Living Hope

Need for hope

If we've learned anything from these past two covid dominated years, we've learned that we want things to be better, healthier, freer, less controlled, open and most of all – more sociable – because the thing which most of us have missed more than anything else has been the untrammelled freedom to meet our friends and family and to enjoy their company without fear of doing them harm. What value do we place upon a hug? And yet, even now we hardly ever even shake one another's hand! Many still feel sufficiently uneasy about mixing in worship that they don't yet come to church. (I'm not blaming any one for that – it is what it is, at the moment). But surely, we who profess faith – hope in the God of hope, look for things to change – not maybe for things to go back to as they were, but for something that offers us more hope, the opportunity to be at ease in gathering for worship, a time when we can mix and talk and interact in a more human, less regimented or controlled way – when we are truly free to worship God without legal constraints or fear of catching or spreading the virus? Think for a moment of some of the emotions that have dominated 2020 and 2021 – fear, grief, worry? Have we not also been angry, overwhelmed, exhausted, down? Perhaps more uncertain than at any other time of our lives? I'd like to think that we have sensed something of God being with us in the darkness but let's be honest enough to admit that there would be few of us whose faith hasn't taken a dent as we have been forced to rethink so much in life which we had previously taken as a given. We need hope. As were the folks in Jeremiah's day when everything that they had held dear was being taken from them, when society was collapsing, exile imminent and survival was the almost an unreachable goal. Or later when the people were under the domination of the seemingly invincible Roman Army, when taxes were extortionate, freedoms nigh on unheard of and the future bleak and miserable. The prophet and the Saviour offered hope – a positive message that wasn't withheld until circumstances became less fraught and there was light on the horizon, but hope in the midst of darkness, among despair. A hope that offered promise. We, too, have a need of hope – and we need it now, right where we are, in the midst of our world which is still in the grip of the pandemic, where the economic life of the world has taken a huge dent, where, hard on the back of COP26 there are still huge questions about how we rise to the challenge of the climate crisis – and where news from Afghanistan is dire and all too many people across the globe live in abject poverty, under regimes that allow little freedom and where justice and peace is to many a pipedream. Does that sound too depressing? Perhaps it is but it certainly points to a world in need of hope. And the good news is that God is a God of hope. His hope comes to us in and to the real world in which we live, a world that has a lot of darkness.

Hope for the long term

It is a facet of modern living that we are conditioned to expect and deliver immediate results. It isn't the preserve of fast food outlets. So much of life revolves round instant communication, speedy deliveries and short wait times. I had to smile when I was

speaking to my Mum on the phone recently – “Did you not get my email?” she enquired. “No”, I replied. “When did you send it?” “A minute or two ago.” Changed days! But there is frustration when the internet is playing up or when an important package is delayed or there are shortages of food (not with us ALL food, which is sadly the case for many, but perhaps some particular item or brand). We have to wait longer for appointments, things can take rather longer but frankly, in most cases we’ve little cause for complaint – and, if we stop to think about it, most people are trying their very best under difficult circumstances, and with reduced staff who are usually under great pressure. Instant often isn’t the ideal solution anyway. Doing things in a rush can lead to corners being cut, quality being diminished, training going by the board, health and well-being going out the window and the “personal attention” being squashed. And, yet so much pressure drives us in that direction – management set goals and targets that are so short term – quarterly, monthly maybe even weekly; governments can’t help but think about what can be done before the next election – they know that some long-term decisions have to be made but they aren’t nearly so significant to voters than the immediate deliverables. Yes, sometimes immediate action is required that may not show outcomes for years and these can be the most significant of all – but politicians and indeed other leaders can struggle – because they are so accustomed to a short term focus. It really will be interesting to see just how much world leaders are willing to ACT and deliver on the promises made in Glasgow.

A good while back a phrase was coined by some who were very critical of Christians who spoke of their hope of heaven and by implication, didn’t pay enough attention to the needs of human beings in this life. “Pie in the sky when you die!” It was often said in a deprecating, dismissive way. If we don’t take the earthly needs of people seriously and only think in terms of the hope to come, in heaven, then the criticism has some validity, but to deny us the biblical hope of heaven is to seriously short-change the whole of humanity. Biblical hope is not made up of instant solutions to all the world’s or indeed any individual’s problems. I’m not saying that God can’t answer a “flash prayer” for help with an almost immediate answer but on the whole God works for the long term. He’s interested in building relationships, changing hearts, mindsets, transforming our behaviour so that we increasingly display the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and all sorts of other similar attributes which were so apparent in Jesus’ his Son. While we might wish for instant results – that isn’t how things work. We can sometimes see significant change for the better over a shorter timescale in one or two aspects of our lives or those known to us, but God is prepared to work with us throughout our lives to build resilience and capacity – to “dig deep” rather than just alter the surface. He’s interested in far more than outward appearances. You could say that God’s work in us is a lifetime commitment!

Similarly, God works his purposes out for the long term – throughout our lifetimes, and, as we were thinking recently even beyond them over generations. If we imagine that the only solutions are the kind that are delivered instantly or over a very short timescale then we will be disappointed. God’s hope is ultimately for the very long term – right through to eternity. Part of his gift to us are eyes of faith to appreciate how he is

working his purposes for good among us now while the full completion of things is yet to come.

Living hope

If hope is to be more than wishful thinking, “pie in the sky when you die”, then it needs to be both thoroughly connected to God AND deeply rooted in earth. And that squares with Jesus – divine and human together. Only a faith that is bound to God and powered by his love is going to be sufficient to cope with the challenges that face us as individuals and as the world’s people. Make no mistake humanity is up against it. Only as we align ourselves with the plans and purposes of the Creator and are empowered by the love of the Redeemer can we hope to turn around despair with hope, injustice with righteousness and inhumanity with love. But it isn’t ONLY a heavenly enterprise. God sent his Son into the WORLD because he loved the WORLD so much. God chose to allow his only Son to become one of us, to live and die among us, to be very much an integral part of human nature because of love. Our earthly reality was the locus of Jesus’ ministry and this world of ours, with all its flaws and challenges, is the place where you and I and all Jesus’ present-day followers are to live out our hope and demonstrate that God is still at work in his world, changing it, changing us so that we more clearly display his love and grace to a needy world. Hope isn’t really a commodity. It’s not simply an ornament to have or even to put in a display case. It is a gift from God, yes, but one that is to be used, applied and acted upon so that it makes a difference to our lives and others’. Advent offers hope – yes ultimately the real hope of heaven or Jesus’ return in glory but also a “here and now” hope that inspires us to live out Jesus’ love and grace in the midst of the ongoing challenges that face the world in 2021 and beyond. Hope is real – it gives us inspiration to live for Jesus now as well as in the future – it is ultimately long term, but the long term begins now. And it is a living, doing, working at things hope which draws on the love and grace of God to begin to build his reign of love in the here and now, not waiting for all the problems to be solved, every issue addressed, but engaging with society to share love, to change behaviour, and to let Jesus be seen and known where people are, even if too often that is in a dark place. There is hope – now – but we need to live it! And we can because in Jesus we have a Living hope!

May the Lord bless you! Amen.