Called to hope

Rev’d Peter Balabanski

Advent Sunday A – Isa 2.1-5

Kids: Puddleglum’s farewell to the underworld. *The Silver Chair* CS Lewis – Ch 12.

* Anyone confident that all is right with the world? Everything’s in good hands? World peace just round the corner? Hunger, injustice and inequality all but under control? Wise, decent leadership at every level of our societies? What might make us confident?

The call of Advent is that we should actively look forward to these good things – peace, shared resources, justice, equality, wise and decent leadership. The call of Advent is that we confidently hope for them; that God’s people truly hope to see God’s Kingdom come; a reign of justice, peace, joy and love. Advent 1 is called the Sunday of the promise. It’s also often celebrated as the Sunday of hope. That’s what we remembered in the prayer of the day: * ***Faithful God, whose* promises *stand unshaken through all generations: renew us in* hope*, that we may be awake and alert.***

The focus of this hope in Isaiah is hope for peace. It’s the great Advent hope; that we look for one who will come to us bringing peace on Earth and good will among all people.

It’s clear that this universal peace and good will is not our present experience. But it’s especially important in times of difficulty that we can keep ourselves alive to the promise – the hope – of God’s kingdom. When things have looked grim, confidence that the future belongs to God has always given hope in the present. And we know hope changes the way we behave; but it changes more than we know. Hope has seen oppressed people overcome terrible evils over the centuries.

And every generation needs hope that the powers of the world do not ultimately determine the future.

Is this choosing a pipe dream – a willful self-deception? It may be. But even then, does that make it worse than not dreaming? Look at the possibilities Isaiah opens up for us. When Isaiah was given today's vision, Jerusalem was facing terrible danger. Israel and Damascus had tried to force the southern kingdom of Judah to join them in opposing the all-powerful Assyrian Empire. It was a foolish move. The Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem, and the king turned to the prophet Isaiah for advice and assurance.

Isaiah offered today's vision of promise. No matter where the power seemed to lie right now, the day was coming when God's reign would be established for all the Earth to see. And he showed it graphically in a vision of all the nations streaming to Jerusalem to learn the ways of God – to learn to walk in God's ways.

Isaiah saw the wisdom of God coming from Mt Zion – from the Temple. The Temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem was far more than a matter of local geography. It represented God's presence in the midst of God's people.

So Isaiah's vision of Zion as the focus of pilgrimage by *all peoples* was not a political claim; it was a spiritual claim: God's presence is the true center to which all nations will eventually flow. When I think that this vision was given to the Judean king while the army of the mighty Assyrian empire surrounded Jerusalem, I'm tempted to think it was at best unrealistic. Yet as I read both the Biblical and the Assyrian accounts of this siege and both agree that this huge army failed to capture Jerusalem, I have to think again.

Isaiah didn't just tell his king that they'd survive the siege. He'd been given a far greater vision. *All the nations shall stream to [God's presence]. Many peoples shall come and*

say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." [The Lord] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. *(= Micah 4.1-3)*

Learning God's ways; walking in God's paths, the nations would accept God's way of determining what is just and right, and as a practical outworking, war would end. Killing people would be replaced with feeding them.

Again, imagine the people of besieged Jerusalem hearing Isaiah proclaim this vision. The Hebrew for crazy is □□□□□□□□□, and I'm sure it would have been muttered pretty freely about the city – until it was clear they'd been spared.

Isaiah was a prophet who could hope. In one of Jerusalem's most frightening times, he could proclaim a vision of all nations – all peoples – drawn to good, decent living; world peace based on justice. Jerusalem desperately needed this person of hope.

It's about 2,745 years since Isaiah gave this vision to a terrified, besieged city. The same obsessions with wealth, power and control which caused their danger still threaten all life today. And every new generation of idealists and peaceniks seizes on Isaiah's image of swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks and they ask very serious questions of those who would settle matters by the use of force – those who would produce and peddle armaments while poor people starve.

And though these idealists might be rubbished for living in fairyland – lost in wilful self-deception – they remind me of someone else who apparently lost track of pragmatic, political realities; someone who risked everything rather than live by

the sword. We celebrated him as our King last Sunday, enthroned on the Cross. And we wait for his coming now – coming as a King born in a stable; coming as a King who will usher in a reign of peace on Earth and good will among all on Earth. * Amen