

First Sunday in Advent. 2 December 2018. Hope.

Three men were in a field, working with a pile of stones, beginning to arrange them in a neat row and gradually arranging them on top of each other. A stranger approached them and asked "What are you doing?" The first looked up and said "What does it look like I am doing, mate? I am building a wall!" The second answered, "I am a stonemason and I am applying my craft, using my knowledge to construct this building." The third looked up with his eyes shining and said, "I am building a cathedral. I am helping to create a place where people will gather, where they will bring their children to celebrate life, where they will come together to celebrate commitment, where they will come to mourn and sing and dance and be immersed in life!"

This first Sunday in Advent, the first Sunday preparing for Christmas, is a day focussed on HOPE.

Hope is what we don't always YET see. YET. That is the important word there. We hope for what we do not yet see. The first man saw only what was in front of his eyes. The second saw a little more. The third of those men had hope.

In the Old Testament we see many times when people are celebrating what was not actually there ... yet. When the people entered the land which had been promised they celebrated, even though most of what was promised and most of what they longed for was not there. Yet. When people returned from exile they celebrated the peace and stability and prosperity which they longed for, but which was not there. Yet. If you had been there when Jeremiah first spoke those words which we heard in the first reading (Jeremiah 33:14-16) you might have said "Come ON, you have got to be kidding. Look at what we have, or rather what we have NOT got. That will never happen. Be realistic!" Being realistic is sometimes given as a foil for being hopeful, but what is really happening is the choice not to be dragged down by a lack of imagination.

The same contrast might happen if we were standing alongside those who were writing the psalms. All those positive psalms praising God for the wonderful things that have been received. Had they actually all happened before the psalms were first sung and spoken? I doubt it. They were signs of hope. They were words and song looking forward to what was still being revealed. The thing about having that sort of hope is that it also puts us on the spot. What will we do to make sure that what we believe can and will and should happen ... happens?

When I was moving some books around on my shelves I re-found a book about building community life. It is called 'Communities of Hope' by Wayne McCashen. It was produced some years ago in the Diocese of Bendigo. It uses what is called a 'strengths approach' to encourage engagement in community. What McCashen weaves into this resource is a fundamental hope which is placed in people and communities. Before we can become communities in which other people find hope we first have to have hope ourselves, hope that we can change, we can grow, we do have strength and knowledge and capacity, we can face issues and treat them as opportunities rather than just as problems. When the positive side is not yet seen, there is room for hope.

The invitation is to recognise challenges and reframe what is in front of us. Change the picture. The invitation is to recognise strengths and celebrate what IS as a way to discovering more of what can and will be.

Reframing and celebrating may sound all too easy to do, or too hard. Many people here and around us in our world are going through challenging times. It can be so easy to lose hope. Our Gospel reading today (Luke 21:25-38) was written into a community which was doing it tough. Fear and persecution and fear of even more to come were debilitating. Looking forward for them seemed like looking down a dark tunnel at times.

To promise that a future will always be smooth easy, covered with rose petals, gentle and simple would be completely unrealistic and unhelpful. Jesus didn't promise an easy path. What he did promise was constant companionship, strength, guidance, wisdom and courage and the capacity together to develop resilience to face the difficult times in life. Together. That is part of why we are here. We find that strength together.

And that strength comes from finding hope. When life is dark and difficult and the challenge may threaten to overwhelm us, we have hope. We see what is as well as what can be.

When we speak about the hope we have as Christians one of the things we speak about is our hope for life beyond death. If struggling with the death of someone close to you is the challenge which you carry then the hope of life beyond this physical life will be in your mind. Tom Wright, a prominent Anglican Theologian, wrote a book a few years ago about this aspect of Christian faith. He called it 'Surprised by Hope'. As Wright reminds us in that book, the basis of Christian hope is actually not some place far away and something that only happens in the future after we die. It is here and now. Realised. That is where Christian hope begins. Our relationship with God is here. Now. What begins here continues beyond the transition of physical death. Heaven doesn't just start for us after we die. It is a relationship into which we enter now.

Putting ALL of our focus on some future time and place and existence is neither healthy psychologically nor is it true to the picture of life and eternal life as we find it in the Bible. As an African-American preacher who I once heard put it. “I don’t want some pie in the sky when I die. I want something sound on the ground while I am still around!” Life, life with God, life which is found in what we refer to as heaven, begins here and now.

Hope, Christian hope, is not about a future so distant and clouded that we have to imagine it. Nor is it based on longing for some past which we want to have return. Hope is about praying and working and longing for and preparing something which is not yet completely seen but which we are confident will come.

Like peace. And compassion. And genuine love. And fairness and tolerance and open hearted community.

These are all part of the Christmas message. They are all part of what we celebrate beginning in the birth of Jesus, and for which we prepare yet again as we prepare to celebrate Christmas.

Have they all arrived yet? Is our world fair and unprejudiced and open and welcoming and loving and peaceful? No. Not yet. But it can be. If that is what we long for and work for and pray for and strive for.

When there is no hope the people perish. Proverbs 29:18. In that verse hope is usually translated ‘vision’, but isn’t it another way of saying the same thing? To have vision is to see, and the same with having hope. Looking forward. Not to have vision, not to have hope is to become closed in, to wither away. To shrivel up. To live what the philosopher Henry David Thoreau called living “lives of quiet desperation.” To lose hope is to contract into a smaller life.

Tim Costello, one of Australia’s leading inspirational voices, wrote a book a few years ago called ‘Hope. Moments of inspiration in a challenging world.’ It is a collection of stories. All of them are amazing and challenging and profound. I want to share part of one story with you.

“In the terrible Gujarat earthquake in India in 2001 World Vision was doing its daily relief distribution of food. Thousands of people had lost their homes and food supplies, so there were long queues and line-ups. The caste context was so entrenched that it seemed unthinkable to do mass food distributions without agreeing to separate the lower castes from Brahmin with different food lines in different places.

But then the staff had a horizon-busting realisation. What better time could there be to remind them that the caste system, which had been outlawed in principle by the government, was over? Caste should make no difference, when they are all humans in need. It was a scary moment when they decided that there would be only one point of distribution – and no caste concessions. Would there be riots? They drew a deep breath and began.

It worked – the millennia of social scripting, which taught that some were superior and others inferior, ceased to make a difference that day. All lined up and collected together peacefully.

Only when the trappings are stripped back do we realise that we are all just fragile humans trying to get by, no matter what our birth rights.” (pp 51-52. Hope. Tim Costello)

The vision of a more open community, more respect and breaking down of the barriers of prejudice was something that the World Vision staff were concerned did not yet exist. And so they acted, in hope, to help to bring it about.

Discovering hope is about shifting the horizon, from a place of fear and negativity and despair into a place where we discover that new things can happen, do happen, will happen.

What will be YOUR story of inspiration to add?

As we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, ... have hope.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell.