

Sunday December 15th Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35: 1-10 Matthew 11: 2-11

Prayer: Father, may these spoken words be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Some words you may have heard in the last couple of days - "But let me say now, for millions of people in our country these results will bring dread and dismay and people are looking for hope." They were from Jo Swinson following the loss of her seat.

Perhaps you can identify with what she said and feel that dread and dismay. May be you are wondering where the hope that so many are seeking can be found?

Now for a few moments, if you are willing, I'd like you to imagine a barren scene. It could be something like the pictures we've seen this week from White Island NZ after the tragic eruption of the volcano – where everything has been wiped out by ash causing utter desolation. Or you may think of landscape following a forest fire – with everything charred and no sign of life. Alternatively you could think of a desert – miles and miles of nothing, emptiness and no resemblance of life.

But now as you imagine your scene you suddenly start to something totally unexpected. Some green shoots are beginning to appear. At first there's just one, but as you look closer more and more start appearing. One here, a group there and gradually everywhere, until the desolation is replaced by a carpet of green. And as you are transfixed on this another change begins to occur: leaves and buds which are shortly followed by flowers of amazing colours, yellows, purples, pink, orange. Where once there had been bareness you are now instead overwhelmed by an amazing scene of colour and beauty and even fragrance of the flowers enters your very being.

Maybe, just maybe you're beginning to get a glimpse of Isaiah's vision - Even the wilderness and desert will rejoice in those days; the desert will blossom with flowers. Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the Lebanon mountains, as lovely as Mount Carmel's pastures and Sharon's meadows; for the Lord will display his glory there, the excellency of our God.

What a transformation - beauty for brokenness, hope for despair..... and overflowing joy.

And just as we asked a couple of weeks ago – is this simply a pipe dream, an illusion by Isaiah – or is it a realistic hope of what our creating, redeeming God is capable of doing?

Let's move on several hundreds of years later to another desolate scene; a man languishing in a prison. He had had an amazing birth – born to parents who had long given up any hope of having children. His Dad. Once he had got his voice back, had declared some astounding prophecies about his life – he would be called the prophet of the most high for he would go before the Lord to prepare his way. He would show the way to salvation of God's people, bring forgiveness and bring light into dark places. Such hope – restoration, recreation.

And in those early days, after his own wildness life, it all looked like it was coming together and it was confirmed to John in a unique way. One day as he was baptising and preparing the people just as the prophecy foretold, Jesus asked to be baptised by him. Had John wondered who his cousin Jesus really was – now all those questions were dispelled as Jesus' true identity was revealed when he came up out of the water. The heavens opened, a dove descended and a voice

from the clouds proclaimed – this is my beloved son – listen to him. Jesus – God’s anointed one, the Messiah who would liberate his people.

And John knew, and desired that Jesus would become more and more prominent while his own role would be diminished. But probably he hadn’t expected to happen just so quickly – within months of this event and his own demise to be so great. And as John sat in the squalor of the prison he began to wonder – had he got it all wrong? Jumped to the wrong conclusions? Put 2 and 2 together and got 5? Had he just imagined the green shoots of God’s Kingdom beginning to push their way through the bareness?

If Jesus really was God’s Messiah – God himself, why wasn’t the other prophecy from Isaiah of the Lord’s servant bringing deliverance to the captives – setting free those in prison happening. Why was he trapped there in disgusting conditions with dire prospects?

Was he wrong about Jesus? John needed to know the answer – and he wasn’t afraid to ask. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’

I’m sure Jesus’ heart went out to John – but he didn’t actually answer his question. Instead he encouraged his disciples to look and listen more closely at what was happening all around them. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

It was a repeat of those very words which Isaiah had said - And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. The lame man will leap up like a deer, and those who could not speak will shout and sing! Springs will burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The parched ground will become a pool, with springs of water in the thirsty land. God was at work fulfilling these prophecies – even though for John it meant imprisonment.

So much depends on how we look at things. You’ve probably heard that famous quote “Two men looked out from prison bars, one saw the mud, the other saw stars.”

What do we look at and hold on to? That barren, desert picture – or do we notice the shoots and observe with amazement as the flowers begin to open up?

I don’t know if you’re a half full or a half empty person. I think naturally I’m more of a half empty person – but I’m trying – with God’s help to be a half full – or preferably a totally full and running over person! I want to see problems as opportunities; disappointments as learning times.

And when, inevitably, I come across things I don’t understand – to act like John and not be afraid to ask the questions but to seek to discover something afresh that God is saying in it.

Jesus never criticised John for questioning – in fact he gave a strong commendation of John – the greatest of all people – God’s chosen messenger. But even John had to learn to trust that God knows what he is doing when things weren’t turning out as he wanted and expected. He had to trust that God would bring everything together in His own time.

Can you imagine John’s disciples returning to his cell and vying with each other to tell the stories of what they had seen and heard. John – it was amazing – if only you could have seen it! There was this woman dancing around – you know the one we used to pass at the roadside begging as she as was lame ... and you remember that guy we’d been at school with but had been cast out of the village for years because of his leprosy – well he’s now completely restored and mingling

among the crowd... you should have seen.... I'm sure the joy just overflowed from them. The joy they had seen and felt in Jesus' presence. It was so exciting – they had witnessed God at work - bringing in his Kingdom. And I'm sure John's heart, despite being in the prison also leaped for joy.

Just as Isaiah had predicted - these, the ransomed of the Lord, will go home along that road to Zion, singing the songs of everlasting joy. For them all sorrow and all sighing will be gone forever; only joy and gladness will be there.

I think for John at that moment his cell was transformed with the presence of God. A quote that I selected for this week - Hope fills the afflicted soul with such inward joy and consolation, that it can laugh while tears are in the eye, sigh and sing all in a breath; it is called "The rejoicing of hope." Hope causes us to rejoice.

Sadly John's situation didn't change – in fact it got far worse; he was never released but shamefully beheaded – but I imagine he found a renewed hope, peace and joy in God. Maybe he discovered as another of our quotes says - there is no greater joy in the Christian life than to trust Him and need no explanation. To rest content that God has everything under control and he will fulfil his purposes in his time even if the present is not of our choosing.

As we look to the future – maybe our initial reaction is one of dread and dismay – but is there another way to look? Can I encourage you to look again during this Advent – and to see those precious green shoots of what God is doing around us. God is still at work in 2019 and will be in 2020.

I've discovered that when I deliberately set out to look to answers to prayer I'm overwhelmed by just how many there are all around! You don't have to go far to find many examples of God's love being shared, lives being transformed, beauty instead of brokenness, hope instead of dismay, joy instead of sadness.

And as we refocus our minds on what God is doing we can become participants of it too and that hope within us can be turned into joy and confidence as we have a God who will fulfil his promises.

Prayer: Father God, help us to see with your eyes, to rest confident in your love and share the good news of your kingdom with those around. Amen

Rev E Blackmore