

Sermon

Christ our Hope

Romans 15:4-13; Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

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We live in troubled times – not as bad as some of you have known – to live through WW2 must have been far more alarming than we are currently seeing and the cold war was at times tense – nonetheless there is much alarmist talk and the news stories out of the Middle East and the political changes in America, the British Brexit and rumours of more instability in Europe all add to the concerns and disquiet many feel.

Reviewing our scriptures today the word before us is Hope. Hope!

Hope is a positive expectation of a future event. Hope is not wishing, it has to be based on some evidence or real promise. Hope is important for our wellbeing but it needs to be real hope. Hope in hope will not do. Biblical hope is in God.

As we look towards the return of Jesus it gives us hope. Why? Because the troubles of this life will be over; the glories of the future rule of Jesus will be with us. We will know him even as we are known. There will be no more tears, no more grief. We will be in his presence. These are foundations for hope.

I enjoyed this a comment by the Venerable Bede, a monk writing in Northern England in the 8th century:

*Christ is the morning star
who when the night of this world is past
brings to his saints
the promise of the light of life
and opens everlasting day.*

Bede knew the hope there is in Christ.



A Song in the Night

During the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century, German pastor Paul Gerhardt and his family were forced to flee from their home. One night as they stayed in a small village inn, homeless and afraid, his wife broke down and cried openly in despair. To comfort her, Gerhardt reminded her of Scripture promises about God's provision and keeping. Then, going out to the garden to be alone, he too broke down and wept. He felt he had come to his darkest hour.

Soon afterward, Gerhardt felt the burden lifted and sensed anew the Lord's presence. Taking his pen, he wrote a hymn that has brought comfort to many.

*Give to the winds thy fears;
hope, and be undismayed;
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears;
God shall lift up thy head.*

*Through waves and clouds and storms,
He gently clears the way.
Wait thou His time, so shall the night,
soon end in joyous day."*

It is often in our darkest times that God makes His presence known most clearly. He uses our sufferings and troubles to show us that He is our only source of strength. And when we see this truth, like Pastor Gerhardt, we receive new hope.

Last week, a visitor challenged the idea that scripture speaks of the future. She believes the Bible is just the writings of wise people and therefore we cannot know anything about the future nor put any trust in it. I guess some of us here may think something similar.

We need to be clear that it is not the view of the writers of scripture. Jesus made startling claims as to the authority and trustworthiness of the scriptures. E.g., Matthew 5:18: Speaking of the Law and the Prophets, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

He, who is our Lord and Saviour, is clear that the words of the Old Testament will be fulfilled and with precision. I cannot see how those who want to take scissors to the Bible and cut away portions which displease them, can then have any trust in the rest. If we choose what we like and what we don't, then we ourselves are the authority. Since we cannot know the future, on what basis can we better determine it than Jesus when he says he offers salvation freely but will judge those who refuse his salvation?

Take the Epistle reading from Romans: Paul wrote in 12:4,

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

By "written in the past", Paul means the Old Testament. He is saying it is given to teach us and through its encouragement with endurance we may have hope.

And according to the next verse it is God who give endurance and encouragement, so God has provided hope through the encouragement of the Bible.

Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome who are both Jewish and Gentile Christian. He is building their unity and confidence in what Christ has done for both Jew and Gentile. He speaks in v7 of their accepting one another as Christ accepted them and continues by making the point that Jesus served the Jewish people confirming the promises made to the Patriarchs – again indicating the fulfilment of scripture. Furthermore, his actions result in the inclusion of the Gentiles which was also prophesied by the patriarchs.

Paul then lists four examples of Old Testament passages which spoke of a future time when the Gentiles would be drawn into the worship of God and glorify God for his mercy. He draws from the Law, the Prophets and the Writings the three main divisions of the Old Testament.

v9 "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name." - 2 Samuel 22:50

v10 "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." - Deut 32:43

v11 "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples." - Ps 117:1

v12 "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him." - Isaiah 11:10

In Paul's time that was coming true through his ministry. But the thrust of the Isaiah's words is greater – it is an establishment of Christ's rule over all the nations.

Our Old Testament passage was this particular portion of Isaiah. He wrote of the coming Messiah and the section ends with the verse we just read quoted in Romans.

Advent is the time when we give attention to the once and future comings of the Messiah. So what are we told about this Messiah?

The Messiah or anointed one is described as "a shoot from the stump of Jesse." Jesse was the father of King David, so the term means a descendent of David. But there is an indication that this is not normal descent. The dynasty has been cut off, the shoot grows from the stump.

The theme of this Second Sunday of Advent is Peace. Jesus will establish a reign of peace when he returns when old enmities are laid down. Isaiah speaks of carnivores at peace with their prey. Some take as a literal picture of that future state while others see it as figurative with the animals representing human character types. But the main point is that there will be a reign of peace and (v9) "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

Isaiah also tells us about the nature of the king. This is our saviour. This is the one we put our hope in. What is he like? Isaiah says he is just, righteous, faithful and peaceable. When he will judge, it will be with righteousness and justice. Wrongs will be stopped. He is clothed in righteousness and faithfulness.¹ I was interested to learn that the Hebrew refers to righteousness as the waistcloth of his hips and faithfulness the waistcloth of his loins. These are the undergarments – that indicates the essential quality and closeness of these attributes to his character.

Who is this King of glory?

Isaiah prophesied that the Spirit of God will rest on the Messiah. Just so, at his baptism, John saw the Spirit descend and remain on Jesus. Then we are told more: This Spirit is the Spirit of Yahweh, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

The Messiah is invested with wisdom, understanding and counsel. He is given knowledge, power and the fear or awe of the Lord. This ruler has all the good qualities you want.

This is our saviour, who grants us his Holy Spirit too. Do we display those qualities too: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, power and fear of the Lord? Just as we need to repent from the negatives so we want to turn towards the positives. These are qualities one could pray for: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, power and the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord will help to keep us obedient and desiring him above other things. If we would be wise, we should seek to grow in the fear of the Lord. It is the key to knowledge, wisdom and salvation. It is not a craven fear. It is a deep respect, a reverence, an awe which makes one want to obey and please.

Lord, help us to have that right fear of you, which makes us want your ways above all else.

Last week we heard that Jesus warned that he would return at an unknown and unexpected time. Paul compared this time of waiting to a long night.

As Bede put it,

*Christ is the morning star
who when the night of this world is past
brings to his saints
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Paul wrote "The hour has come for you to wake up ... so let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light."²

¹ Is 11:5

² Romans 13:11-12 abbreviated

Gospel

Turning to this week's gospel reading, we pick up an announcement of the imminent first coming of Christ - the preaching of John the Baptist as he made the people ready for Jesus to step onto the stage of Jewish public life.

His call to the people was change your minds! "Repent! The Kingdom of Heaven is near."

People flock to John and start confessing their sins. He baptises them to signify repentance. But he has strong words for those who take lightly his warning.

Produce fruit worthy of repentance! Don't just say you have repented, show it by your actions. Fruit is what grows on a tree and shows its nature. The fruits of our lives are the things that develop and show to others what we are like inside. John warns that false repentance will not help them – there is a judgment to come: (v10) "The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Back then, Jesus came on a rescue mission. Next time, Jesus will come to rule and to judge. John warned of that when he says, (v12)

"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

The threshing floor is where the heads of wheat are trampled or beaten to separate the grains of corn from the chaff. Then follows the process of separation to extract the corn from the rest. The farmer would use his winnowing fork to toss the mixture in the air and the wind would blow the lighter chaff aside while the wheat would fall straight down. This is separation; this judgement. That is the future role of Christ.

Those who put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour and truly repent can have confidence that they will be found as wheat not chaff. This is why Paul said the Gentiles were giving God glory – because they hope in Christ.

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who when the night of this world is past
brings to his saints
the promise of the light of life
and opens everlasting day.*

We give God glory because we hope in Christ.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him. So may you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.