

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Song of Isaiah – Isaiah 12. 2-6)

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This week and next are the last two weeks of the church's year, before we begin the new liturgical year with the season of Advent and our preparations in earnest for Christmas. Over these two weeks, the lectionary readings replace the psalm set for the day with two biblical songs – the Song of Isaiah which we've just heard, and next week the Song of Zechariah which comes early in Luke's gospel. These two songs, one each from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, are poems of great beauty which express hope in God and proclaim the fulfilment of God's promises. It's struck me that they might prepare us to hear and receive the Christmas story in a fresh way. This week, we focus on Isaiah's Song.

From the very beginning, the words of the prophet Isaiah formed a lens through which the Christian community interpreted its experience of Jesus. Indeed, so much was this the case that the early church described the book of Isaiah as the 'fifth gospel' since, together with the four gospels of the New Testament, it contained (they believed) 'the crucial claims of Christian faith'.¹ Hear some of the words of Isaiah most familiar to us: 'a young woman would bear a son and shall name him Immanuel' (Isa.7.14); 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ... for a child has been born for us, a son given to us' (Isa.9.2a, 6); 'a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse ... [and] the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding ...' (Isa.11.1-2). These prophetic visions captured the imagination of the gospel writers as they told the Christmas story and

¹ Walter Brueggeman, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.6.

they've been passed on to us in countless hymns and carols and, unforgettably, in Handel's *Messiah*.

Almost no biblical scholar now believes that Isaiah foresaw the birth of Jesus. His words pertain to his own historical situation – a context of impending invasion and exile for the people of Judah at the hands of the Assyrian Empire in the 8th century BCE. But, for all that, there is something profoundly truthful in the early church's use of Isaiah's words to express its experience of Jesus. For these are words that testify to the promise that hope will triumph over despair, that trust in God's goodness will prove justified even in the face of catastrophe and exile. Jesus is understood in terms of a dynamic that has repeated over and over again in Israel's relationship to God – God's coming amongst the people to save them. So it is that the first part of the Book of Isaiah ends with this song of praise: 'Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid ... With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation'. So it is that we are invited to repeat these words as we approach the season of Christmas.

Yet, how difficult for many to say these words with integrity. In our world, suffering goes on unabated, and the proclamation of hope, of God's goodness and faithfulness and will to save, can seem almost blasphemous. In the face of disasters like the typhoon in the Philippines, the despair of asylum seekers held in indefinite detention by our government and our own traumas and griefs, how can we authentically hope? What is there to hope for when what is broken cannot be fixed – when my ageing body will never be stronger, when one I love will never be returned, when the work I chose has been taken from me, when the village that was my home has been razed to the ground? What possible meaning might the promise that we will 'draw water from the wells of salvation' have then? From this perspective, Isaiah sounds like a prophet in denial. And I think it is helpful to be reminded that in the Buddhist tradition, hope is considered more of a vice than a virtue. To hope for something looks like resisting 'what is' in this present moment. It seems tied to

untruthfulness and avoidance, a kind of *wishing* which stops the work of courageously facing and accepting a reality that may never be any different.

So, it seems to me, that if we are to proclaim a hope that is authentically of God and that truly *does* deepen life and connect us to reality, then we need a different kind of understanding. A recognition that Isaiah's hope is **not** grounded in a refusal to face facts, a whistling in the dark, or an unfounded assumption that things will get better and turn out in the end. No, the source of Isaiah's hope and his song, is his intimacy with God, his living experience of the God who is Creator, the God for whom all things are possible, the God who, even in the most unpromising of circumstances, is capable of doing a 'new thing'.

And this means, first, if the source of Isaiah's hope is his intimacy with God, then hope is not something that the prophet generates for himself or maintains out of his own resources, by 'staying positive' or 'looking on the bright side'. Hope is not 'our' hope, something the prophet possesses, but is what we discover rising up as we are drawn more and more fully into God's life. And often that happens only on the other side of despair, only when I have given up trying to generate my own capacity to hope and acknowledged that I am powerless to do so (the Buddhists are right about that). In my experience, this kind of hope is one of the fruits of meditation – a fruit of a practice of yielding the whole of my life, my wishing, my fear, my despair, in prayer. Hope happens in us, is born in us. Authentic hope is gift – surprising and unexpected, and strangely independent of our circumstances. And, by contrast with the fear that 'hope' is a form of unreality, our testimony is that it arises as we are more not less open to the reality of God, whose nature just is boundless and creative possibility.

And second, this hope is experienced by us as expectancy, which is not the same as fixed expectation. Of course, we long for certain things – to recover from an illness, for our loneliness to be assuaged, to find our true vocation, to be reunited with our family. But the persistence and justification of our hope is not conditional

upon our longings being answered – and here I think of some of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison. The gift of hope remains a stance, an experience of trusting expectancy which sustains us through suffering, and keeps our hearts open to the larger horizon of God’s presence even in the midst of grief and unfulfilled desire. The point of biblical hope is not that it guarantees we get what we want; the point is that it draws us to risk ourselves, entrust ourselves more and more to the energy of the Creator, so that whatever happens *within* our lives, we may yet *yield* our lives by faith into the life-giving source of all life. And by this means, in ways we cannot understand, we participate in the healing of the whole.

So here we are, two weeks from the end of the church’s year – beginning to turn our attention to the Christmas season. The Song of Isaiah invites us trust the promise that hope will triumph ‘gloriously’ over despair, and the Song of Zechariah will proclaim that in Jesus this promise is being fulfilled. And here we are, in the midst of a gravely suffering world, asked to be bearers of this message and witnesses to its truth. And it seems to me that the only way we can do this, and our words not ring as hollow as the carols in the shopping malls, is if we rediscover hope, and trust in a future, and faith in God’s goodness, as given.

If Isaiah’s hope is sourced in who God is, this means that the ground of hope is always there, like an underground river below the surface of our lives, like a well from which we may one day find ourselves drawing water. Sometimes in history, sometimes in our lives we experience this river breaking the surface – in the words of the prophets, in the birth of Jesus, in the sudden and fragile knowledge that we are held unshakeably despite everything. And our practice consists simply in seeking to be open to this reality, letting it become the source of energy in our lives so that one day, we might find ourselves joining with the prophet shouting and singing for joy ‘for great in our midst is the Holy One of Israel’.