

Jer 33:14-16; Ps 25:1-9; 1 Thess 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Happy new year! Happy new church year, that is. It's the first Sunday in Advent. A season of looking back and looking forward.....a traditional new year activity of course. Back to the prophets, as well as the time of Jesus and then forward to a future when the whole world and its relationship with God may change radically.

As well as looking back and forward as the Church, with a big 'C', it's natural for us to look back at our own lives and our own spiritual journey. Hopefully we can use that to reflect on where we are now in our faith and how we live our lives. We can also consider our individual futures, although that will always contain unknowns.

As a church, with a small 'c', we are very much contemplating our future at the moment, thinking of how we may need to change as a body of Christ who meet together. Do we continue to meet here for our main regular worship or do we move to meet at St Francis? How do we need to change and how might this building have to change?

Why do we look back and look forward? We look back to how Jesus fits into the history of the Jewish people; into the history of humanity's relationship with God.

We look back at our own lives to see what and who have been important, what lessons we can learn, perhaps rekindle or hold onto the memories of what has brought us close to God in the past.

We look at St Aldhelm's to think what our time here has meant to us,...and others, then think how it can best serve the wider community and future generations of worshipers in a sustainable way.

As some might say, in a rather understated way – 'we live in interesting times'. Some may prefer to say that we live in troubled times. We could ask were there ever times not troubled? Luke's Gospel, that we have just read from was written at a time when the church was already at odds with the world and was facing persecution. This chapter also deals with major historic events which are signs that the world is changing. It is a world in turmoil and through all this turmoil Christians must maintain their faith. The third element of this chapter is hope.

The first advent candle we have lit today is associated with hope. Even a single small candle flame breaks through the darkness. It can be seen from a long way off. Add further small flames and the impact grows. Each of us is a beacon of hope in the world. Together, we make a big light that can shine into many lives. We can bring hope into many lives.

What are the hopes we draw from our Gospel message? Hope that things will get better. Hope that the whole world will be redeemed. Such hope was not new to Luke and the other disciples, or to the Jewish people. Our reading from Jeremiah speaks in verse 16 of a time when ‘Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety’ It says that the one who will bring this about will be called ‘the Lord our righteousness’.

Hope is something that we need more than ever in difficult times. Some may be disparaging about hope in a religious context. Karl Marx dismissed religion as ‘the opiate of the masses’. If our faith was based on purely on a benefit to ourselves in the future, either after our death or after some end of the world event, I would find some grounds to agree. But surely our faith is about a living God, with us now – Immanuel, that name we have sung this morning, means ‘God is with us’. Rightly we use it around Christmas to celebrate the incarnation, God made flesh as a human baby. God with us, as part of humanity, as a child. Yet we celebrate more than that. We celebrate the risen Christ as someone with whom we can have a personal relationship. We celebrate the Holy Spirit as that presence of God with us. We have a real and present hope.

Perhaps the main lesson from today that it is how we approach the troubles in our lives, the troubles in the world in a way which brings honour to God. In our reading from 1st Thessalonians Paul’s prayer is ‘that the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else’. The ‘each other’ is our worshipping community; the ‘everyone else’ is *everyone* outside of that circle. That means people in our local community, but also those across the world.

Today, across the world there are demonstrations about climate change. They are often described as being part of a campaign for ‘climate justice’ because climate change will disproportionately affect the poor in the world, both in terms of nations and individuals. There is a demonstration here in Bristol and I will be joining thousands of others to say to the governments and all those attending the climate summit in Paris that action needs to be taken now to prevent untold misery for millions in the future, massive environmental destruction and enforced migration on a scale much greater even than we are seeing today. Action also means making changes in our own lives. Like the combined effects of small candles, the collective impact is significant.

We can think of the other troubles of the world - of war and conflict, which we have seen reaches into our society too; injustice; the gross inequalities between rich and poor. How we deal with such issues is important. Do we tackle them in a way which brings glory to God? Do we show love and compassion? Or do we just conform to the ways of the world? Will more bombs bring peace or create more enemies, as well as killing and maiming innocent lives?

Do we try to help migrants fleeing for their lives or extreme poverty in properly significant numbers or do we see it as just someone else's problem. Do we allow our fear that some of them could be terrorists, condemn the vast majority. What actions show us as people of light?

Tackling the root sources of problems is important, but often not easy – be it creating peace or reducing carbon emissions. We also have to deal compassionately with the consequences.

Although we face our own problems and questions as individuals and as a church community, I hope that we can still continue to care for wider issues. Remember the verse 'the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else'.

Luke and his contemporaries strongly believed, strongly hoped, that Jesus would return within their lifetimes, but he did not. That belief would have helped them to keep going through times of often extreme persecution. As time has gone on, that particular hope will have seemed increasingly difficult to see as becoming a reality. The time at which the New Testament scriptures were written perhaps helped to create a particular emphasis on Christ coming again, but it is certainly there and cannot be ignored. Even though we can feel God's presence with us here today, even in our troubled world, it is perhaps natural for us to have a longing for a permanent, all-embracing relationship with God with a full understanding of his nature.

Sometimes we may need to adjust our hopes and expectations in the light of changing knowledge, changing perceptions, changing times.

What should we hope for? Our every wish to be granted...or only what is reasonable and sensible? Hope is *not* about ignoring a problem and thinking that it will just go away. Hope is *not* about thinking that someone else will sort the problem. Although we have to put our trust in God, that doesn't necessarily mean that we leave everything only for Him to sort. We have to be open to finding how God can use us to sort things. That needs to be done prayerfully.

Hope *is* about freeing us from a downward spiral of despair, about finding the positives in dark times, about inspiring us to action. We still have to try to make sure that our actions are the right ones. That may not be easy. Whatever we do may carry risks with it. Any action can bring with it unforeseen consequences. We may not agree with all possible actions. Hope triumphs over fear. We need to have hope in our hearts, but we also need to have grace and love. In working together despite holding differing views, be it on theology or buildings, my prayer is that we can strengthen our fellowship. Evil wins when people are divided, separated off as different from us, vilified, be it within a community or between peoples or religions.

We may feel that we face a whole range of troubles facing us today – globally, in our local church, in our individual lives, but we can face all of these with the hope which Christ gives us and I hope filled and overflowing with love for each other and everyone else.

May we live well - live righteous lives full of hope and love, even in troubled times and in doing so, may we be beacons for Christ, the light of the world.