

A promise of Restoration

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 15th December 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 35; Matthew 11:2-11

(Lectionary Year A 3rd Sunday of Advent)

Promises, promises!

A few weeks ago three leaflets came through our door. I wonder if you remember – or can guess - which was from which party?

It's time for real change. – Labour

Better hospitals. Safer streets. Improved schools. – Conservative

Stop Brexit. Build a brighter future. – Lib Dems

As we all know, politicians can promise the earth in the run-up to a general election. What we will judge them by is what they actually deliver if they get into power. Of course, unforeseen developments in the wider political and economic environment can scupper even the best-laid plans, but we do expect politicians to be both ambitious about what they promise – seeking to make real changes for the good of the country – and realistic.

A message of hope

At this time of year, I expect most of us have had other communications through our door asking for our participation. This one for George was from Guide Dogs for the Blind. It's entitled *Give the gift of Hope this Christmas*. Inside I read the story of a lady called Louise:

“When I went blind, I thought my life was over. I was stuck at home, not able to do anything. But everything changed when I got my guide dog, Trinity. She didn't just give me back my independence, she gave me the confidence to help others. Now I'm back at work and doing the things I want to, because I can.”

The simple message of this communication is that supporting the Guide Dogs charity can transform the lives of others for whom the future might otherwise seem bleak. And similar messages are in communications I've received in the last few days from Tearfund and Hope for Justice (the name says it all) which incorporates Retrak.

Advent is a season of hope, as we look forward not only to celebrating the birth of Jesus but also to his Return as our Judge. The theme of hope is also clearly illustrated in today's reading from Isaiah chapter 35:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.¹

The prophet also speaks of the desert blossoming and waters breaking forth in the wilderness. It was in the wilderness that John the Baptist lived, and where he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The Kingdom of God is coming, he told people, a message which Jesus himself took up and proclaimed, not only by words but by deeds of power, opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, healing the paralysed and loosing the tongues of the mute.

¹ Isaiah 35:5-6 NRSV

The book of Isaiah is a collection of prophecies which were probably given over a wide period of time in response to very different political situations in the history of Israel, from the period when the kingdom of Judah was threatened by the Assyrian Empire through to the time of the Persian King Cyrus, who allowed the Jews to return from exile in Babylon to rebuild their homeland. It is not completely clear what is the context for the prophecy in chapter 35, and how literally we are to understand it. It is, after all, poetry.

But the message of this passage, as of many other prophecies in the book of Isaiah, is clear: God has good purposes for his people. They may have been through tough and punishing experiences, where despair reigned and hope was lost, but in spite of all of that, and in spite of their grievous failings and sins, God had a plan for restoration.

And for ourselves, whatever difficult times we may have been through, and however bleak the future might look, however uncertain we might be about what lies ahead, God wants us to know that his good purpose is to bring healing, restoration and transformation, both in the lives of individuals and families, and in nations and the world.

A moment of doubt

Of course, it is easy for me to stand in this pulpit and speak a message of hope. But each of us, at different times, goes through moments of doubt – doubting ourselves and doubting God. This seems to be what John the Baptist is experiencing in today’s gospel reading. The man who seemed to exude conviction about his message and confidence in his calling while standing by the river Jordan, rebuking religious leaders and criticising King Herod for his adultery with his brother’s wife, is now shut up in prison with no prospect of a fair trial or release.

It is very easy for us also, when our plans go wrong, when relationships are under strain or unexpected illness or tragedy strikes, to let the worries of the moment rob us of our confidence, our hope and our trust in God. Many of the greatest saints in the Bible and Christian history have experienced this – take Moses and Elijah as classic examples.

As he sat in his lonely cell, John seems to need reassurance that Jesus was indeed the Messiah that he had proclaimed.

And so he sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”²

A word of encouragement

Jesus responds to John with a word of encouragement. And in his inimitable style, he doesn’t just answer with a “Yes” or “No”, but points to the evidence of God’s work through his ministry and sends back this message:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”³

Jesus invites John, his disciples and those who are listening in, to engage their senses, their minds and their faith, and so find reassurance. His words echo the prophecy of Isaiah we have read today and also the prophecy in Isaiah 61 about the Lord’s servant bringing good news to the poor.

And in the same way, I believe God invites us to connect his promises in the Bible, and the evidence of our own experience and that of others, with our own faith, so as to rekindle our hope that he will bring about healing, restoration and transformation in those areas of our lives and our world that seem dry, barren or hopeless. And if we are fortunate enough not be facing

² Matthew 11:3 NRSV

³ Matthew 11:4-6 NRSV

our own moment of doubt or perplexity right now, let us take the opportunity to pray for those who are, and maybe, if we have the chance, to give them a listening ear and a word of encouragement.

A challenge for us this Christmas

The Christmas story which we will shortly be remembering is all about God’s good purposes for the world – it speaks of God’s love for the world which he created good but which has been spoiled by sin. In Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, God reaches out with his promise of healing, restoration and transformation. The Church – and you all know that doesn’t mean the institution but you and me – has been entrusted with this message of hope. Just as Jesus brought healing, restoration and transformation to the people he met, so through us he can bring the same to people today. It is our responsibility to reach out to them, through acts of kindness, care and moral support, and by sharing the message of hope with them. There are easy ways to share the good news – just invite someone to come along to our carol service, and they will hear the message explained.

This Christmas let us give a gift of hope – let’s share the love of God so that others can experience the fulfilment of God’s promise of restoration for themselves.

Questions for Reflection

1. How hopeful do you feel about your own life, and about the world?

	Very hopeful	Cautiously optimistic	Indifferent	Anxious	Despairing
Your life					
The world					

2. What encouragement or challenge do you get from today’s Bible passages and sermon?