

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 3 January 2021 11.00am

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A couple of months ago we acquired Netflix, mainly because I wanted to watch The Crown – I know, I've got a lot of catching up to do! and I've been enjoying it so far. For those who don't know, The Crown is the drama about the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. It is mostly based on facts, although some of it has picked up on rumours and run with them. At times I have been able to recall what comes next, other times I have wondered if certain stories are factual or have been the writer's artistic licence. And inevitably I have referred to google and Wikipedia to check out details of certain events - I don't think I'm on my own in doing so.

But we can do that with history can't we? We can check back, either our own memories of events in our lifetime, or historical records, and we can learn from the past. We can check back, but we can't predict forward.

This time last year, we couldn't have known what was going to happen this past year. But we can learn from it. There is no going back to how things were, it is in the past and life will never be the same again. We can only move forward, start again.

The reading from Jeremiah feels more profound than ever right now. They are words of restoration for the people of Israel who have been in exile for so long. Life as they knew it previously has gone. They have been scattered far and wide, and now is the time for them to be gathered in by God for a great, emotional return home. There will be rejoicing and dancing for joy at being gathered in, brought into relationship with God, into the arms of the loving creator.

These words from God through the prophet speak of longing and hope. Jeremiah is speaking not as an outsider but one who is caught up in the despair, one who has had to bear the loneliness and isolation of not being listened to after warning the people of what was to come.

These words speak clearly to us today as we try to imagine what this new year will bring - the hope of vaccines being rolled out much wider, the potential for us to be an almost covid-free world, to look forward to being able to gather together again in person, to be able to visit loved ones, to hug one another, to travel, to do it all safely. I wonder what is on top of our list of things to do once we are able to and what is our overriding hope for this year?

We have, it seems, been living in an exile of sorts, stumbling around, struggling, mourning our old lives, desperate to get back to what we are familiar with, to some sort of normality.

We have been told on numerous occasions, in various Government press conferences, news items, etc, how to keep ourselves and one another safe - wash hands, wear face masks, keep our distance, don't gather together, no visiting our loved ones. We have been warned, we have been given

predictions from the medical experts of what will happen if we don't heed them, yet still we have not all heeded them, with devastating consequences.

Yet, there is still hope. The picture given to us by Jeremiah of how the future will be may not have matched reality completely, but imagining a new way of being and dreaming of what it could be like, what we will be able to enjoy in the future, gives form to hope and encourages us to put our trust in God.

Paul's letters encouraged those early Christian communities to put their trust in God. The opening of his letter to the Ephesians is quite amazing. It feels, when you read it through, as though he hardly drew breath as he spoke the words. You can fairly feel his joy as the words leap off the page, dancing with wonder at the truth that is God's abundant, lavish, everlasting love for everyone. That Jesus Christ came so that we could be saved, forgiven and redeemed, that we could be children of God, and marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit - all to God's pleasure and glory. How fabulous is that?

It is in a similar vein that Paul writes to other young churches - sharing the good news with them time and time again, sharing his understanding of the gospel and what it means for their individual lives.

I wonder what it is of our understanding of the gospel that we want to say over and over again? What is it about the story of God, of Christ coming among us that we want to share with others, and how does that storytelling change our relationship with Jesus? How does it transform us?

What is it that we need to hear and share with one another as we begin this new year with hope, learning from the past, from the old way of being, focussing on the present and imagining the future, the new way of living?

John's gospel reminds us that Jesus was present from the beginning - in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. Jesus, light and life of the world. Jesus, before all creation came into being. Jesus, the fulfilment of God's promise and purpose.

The very essence of God's nature is love, shown from the beginning, as the world was brought into being, and through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and everything in-between and since, and in our lives now.

John's words echo those of the creation story, bringing life and light into the chaos. Love being shown and shared through Jesus, full of grace and truth, and making God known to us, accessible to us, making it possible for us to be in relationship with our creator.

All the writers we have heard from this morning offer words of hope to very different communities throughout the story of God - different places, different times, different contexts, different challenges. Yet all with a common message - there is hope, trust in God, be confident in God's love and grace and truth.

We are formed by God through love, saved by Jesus through love, sealed and marked by the Holy Spirit through love. None of that is static or completed. We are continually being moulded and transformed, forgiven and renewed, guided in our lives and reminded that we belong to God, that we are children of a loving God, created to share all that Jesus is and to see his image in ourselves.

Yet, in our struggles and the chaos of life, it is easy to lose sight of all that is promised to us. I will admit that there have been times when my faith wavered, times when I felt so alone and scared, when all I could focus on was my fear.

In our pain and despair, we can have doubts and we can question our trust in God's goodness, we can forget to depend on the Holy Spirit, we can forget all that Jesus taught us about how to live with grace and truth, we can forget that God created us and loves us and delights in us. We can forget that we are not alone, that God comes to us in many forms, that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the words of others, that the love and grace of Jesus is shown to us through the actions of human angels.

After the year we have just experienced I think we need to hear the words of hope that these readings offer even more than ever and be reminded of God's promises to us.

Once again, we start a new year not knowing what the future holds but there **are** glimmers of hope. We can look to the future, learning from the past and how it can transform us, and we can imagine a new way of being, and dream of what it could be like. God has made it clear to us through the centuries, in coming among us in the form of Jesus, that we can be hopeful and be encouraged to put our trust in the one who loves us unconditionally and without limit.

There is an image that is doing the rounds on Facebook at present that reminds me of the words of our readings today and where we are right now – it is a picture of a tree-stump, the remains of a tree that has been cut down. Its roots are still in-tact in the ground, and there is a new shoot growing from what remains of the trunk and the new shoot is reaching towards the sun's rays – new life from the remnant of the tree is being nurtured. And the words surrounding this image say this: May we grow back not to what was but instead towards what we can become.

What will we learn from the past year, are we ready to let go of the old way of being, our pre-covid world, to trust in God's promises, and allow ourselves to be transformed by the experiences, to imagine another world, and to rejoice in the new?

Amen.