

'Hope for the Hopeless'

***Sermon preached by Rev Tony Windross on 18 December 2016
The Fourth Sunday of Advent based on Matthew 1: 18-end***

'And a Saviour will come to you – and you shall call him Donald'

It's a bizarre pairing, but the two names on people's lips at the moment in the West, are those of Jesus – and Donald Trump.

And whatever the differences between them – both carry the weight of people's hopes and expectations.

A few years ago – it was Osama bin Laden who was regarded by many in the Arab world as having the power to save them from oppression and despair.

For many Americans now – it's Donald Trump who's going to do that.

The one to defeat the forces of darkness – and help good triumph over evil.

But whatever the vagaries of politics – the Church continues to stick with the Jesus narrative.

And although that at least shows consistency – some might wonder why (if the story is as good as it's claimed to be) – the Kingdom is no nearer now than it was 2000 years ago.

In fact (of course) – the Jesus-story didn't stop 2000 years ago – and it didn't start then either.

It goes a lot further back – with deep roots in the prophet Isaiah.

This is why we get to hear a lot of him at this time of year (although it's really *'them'* not *'him'* – as a whole series of different people produced the materials which were later grouped together under the banner of *'Isaiah'*).

But whatever their origin – the writings of Isaiah (as with most of the Old Testament prophets) are all about *release from bondage*.

Which is clearly a work still-in-progress – as bondage is alive and well today in (among other places) Iraq, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Places where there's little hope – and a lot of hate.

Which is why the words and works of bin Laden a few years ago, and those today of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the leader of ISIS) – are lapped up so gratefully by the disaffected and desperate.

And why so many Americans who felt marginalised and powerless – responded so positively to Donald Trump.

People need hope – and if it's not on offer from the good guys – they'll get it elsewhere.

The words of Isaiah spoke directly to the disaffected and desperate of the little kingdom of Judah all those years before.

And it's something we need to be particularly mindful of at this time of year – when we hear the familiar Christmas stories – and sing all the lovely carols..

Because Isaiah's words weren't meant as seasonal easy-listening – but as a stirring and revolutionary message of hope – to those who hadn't any.

That's not how we hear them, of course – but although we know them well enough – we don't get tired of them.

Their sheer familiarity gives us something to focus on – in a world that is changing so much (and at such speed).

Because however comfortable our lives are – *it's still good* to have some things that are relatively fixed (which is why people cling onto faith especially tightly in times of trouble).

And it's also good – that the stories can be taken in all sorts of different ways.

Some people understand them as pieces of history, some as myths, some as uplifting tales.

None of these is especially privileged – and it really *is* a case of '*the more, the merrier*' when it comes to different ways of understanding them.

Because the more ways and levels in which the stories can 'work' the better – as it improves the odds of them speaking to the greatest number of people.

And that's what matters!

Not the way they're understood – but the way they can bring life into dark places.

Hope into hopeless places. Light into dark places. Love into hate-filled places.

The reason we don't tire of them – is that they respond to our deepest needs.

And because these are a reflection of human nature (and human nature is essentially unchanging) – the stories remain forever fresh.

The issues that concerned people in Jesus' time – are the same ones that concern people today.

Then (as now) – people had to decide how to live their lives. What mattered and what didn't.

Then (as now) – the world was divided into oppressors and oppressed – and people had to decide what (if anything) they were going to do about it.

For many in the Arab world – the issues of justice and peace (and whether there's a future for their children) are at least as pressing today as they were in Jesus' time.

(and just as they had been 700 years before *him* – in Isaiah's time).

Given how crucial these are to human flourishing – it's hardly surprising that the central thread of the Bible – is the release of people from oppression of one sort or another.

And this is why its words have a timeless relevance.

The great majority of human beings are in thrall to some kind of oppression – something that enslaves and entraps us.

It might be political, it might be social, it might be intellectual, it might be economic, it might be spiritual.

But whatever it is – we want (on some level) – to be free of it.

Which is why the Good News of the Gospels *is* so good – provided we can do something with it.

And that's the problem – *and the challenge*.

Because unless (and until) people outside the churches (and not a few inside them as well) – come to think of the bible as a way of achieving liberation – they're going to want nothing to do with it.

Much of the stuff in the Gospels is difficult to understand – and when we're trying to make sense of them – it's a good idea to remember they were actually written backwards!

Common sense says that without Christmas – there could have been no Easter.

But (as is often the case) – common sense is wrong!

The reality is that *without Easter – there could have been no Christmas!*

And this is why the gospel writers started at the end – and worked their way back to the beginning – beginning with the Resurrection stories – and finishing with the Christmas stories.

Everything in the New Testament is written from the perspective of people who were convinced of the truth of the Resurrection.

And this is why the Christmas stories (like all the others) are effectively parables – intended to convey their authors' conviction of Jesus' power and significance.

In a sermon, Paul Tillich, the German theologian (whose outspokenness against the Nazis resulted in him having to flee Germany for America) recounted how, in the Nuremberg war crime trials a witness appeared who had lived for a time in a grave in a Jewish graveyard, in Wilna, Poland.

It was the only place he (and many others) could find to hide – after they'd escaped the gas chamber.

During the time he was there – the man wrote poetry. And one of the poems was the description of how (in a grave nearby) – a young woman gave birth to a boy.

The man saw how the eighty-year-old gravedigger assisted in the birth.

And when the new-born child uttered his first cry – the old man prayed '*Great God, hast thou finally sent the Messiah to us? For who other than the Messiah himself can be born in a grave?*'

But after three days – he saw the child sucking only his mother's tears – because she had no milk for him.

This story (Tillich said) – which surpasses anything the human imagination could have invented – has not only incomparable emotional value, but also tremendous symbolic power.

'When I first read it', he said 'it occurred to me more forcefully than ever before that our Christian symbols, taken from the Gospel stories, have lost a great deal of their power – because too often repeated and too superficially used.

'It has been forgotten' he said 'that the manger of Christmas was the expression of utter poverty and distress – long before it became the place where the angels appeared and to which the star pointed.

And it has been forgotten that the tomb of Jesus was the end of his life and of his work – long before it became the place of his final triumph.

‘We have become insensitive’, he said, ‘to the infinite tension which is implied in the words of the Apostle’s Creed: ‘suffered was crucified, dead, and buried . . . rose again from the dead’.

We already know (when we hear the first words) – what the ending will be: ‘rose again’.

And for many people it is no more than the inevitable ‘happy ending’.

The old Jewish gravedigger knew better.

For him – the immeasurable tension implicit in the expectation of the Messiah – was a reality appearing in the infinite contrast between the things he saw – and the hope he maintained.

The depth of this tension is emphasised by the last part of the story.

Because, after three days the child was not elevated to glory; he drank his mother’s tears, having nothing else to drink.

Probably he died – and the hope of the old Jew was frustrated once more, as it had been frustrated innumerable times before.

*No consolation can be derived from this story; there cannot be a happy ending.’
(The Shaking of the Foundations p166-7)*

And that’s the problem.

Life has always to be lived forwards – and made sense of later (if at all).

The old gravedigger had faith – but it was dashed.

That’s often what happens – but without faith – there’s no hope at all.

Joseph (in today’s Gospel story) – also had faith.

And although it wasn’t well-founded (in that it’s always a risky thing to believe what you think you’ve been told in a dream!) – things turned out all right.

At least they did for Joseph – because by the time Jesus was crucified Joseph had long since died.

Joseph took an almighty risk, marrying Mary in the circumstances – and doubtless

set a lot of tongues wagging in the process.

But he did what he felt was right – and that's all any of us can do.

He lived on the basis of faith – which is what the Christian life is all about.

In a very real sense, Jesus was born in a grave – in that his Messiahship originated not in the stable but in the tomb.

And although the stable was grim – the tomb was even worse.

But out of such unpromising circumstances – came a story (and a glory) that swept the world.

Not so that it was free of injustice and despair – but so that people were given a way of living that had the potential to free the world of injustice and despair.

It's our life's-work (and that of every other Christian) to try to actualize this potential – and to show that the approach of people like Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – is *not* the way forward.

Peace in and around Israel is about as far off as it can be, and the whole of the Middle East (especially, of course, Syria at the present time) – is awash with the tears of parents and children, as hating begets more hating, and killing begets more killing.

In these last days of Advent, as we look forward with eager anticipation to Christmas – we need to remember the faith of that old Jewish gravedigger, and go forward in hope and in love.

Trusting against all the odds that a way through the mind-blowingly complex and intractable problems will be found.

And that the grievances of the Palestinians and the millions of other dispossessed and damaged and hopeless people in the Middle East (and elsewhere) – are taken seriously by those with the power to make things better.

If the preachers of hate are not to have an unending supply of willing recruits – 'peace on earth and mercy mild' must *not* be allowed to be treated as simply seasonal mood music – but as things that are worth striving for.

Because without them – without that shining star of a world built on Love rather than on Hate and Indifference – what *does* this all this Hope we keep babbling on about in Advent actually amount to?