

Sunday 8th December 2013

St Barnabas, E17

Advent Two: Hope

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Last week I suggested how during Advent we wait in *faith* for the God who comes to us and works from within the brokenness of our world to bring healing and justice. That, I said, is what gives us *hope* that the world can change. That is what gives us the *courage* to co-operate with God. That is why we work for *peace* in expectation of the *joy* to come. I mentioned that these great themes of *Faith, Hope, Courage, Peace and Joy* would form the topics for our Advent and Christmas sermons this year. And so this week, having preached on *faith* last week, it is the turn of *hope*!

And what a time to be thinking about hope, in these days following the death of someone whose life was a symbol of hope, who is an inspiration to those who struggle throughout the world. Nelson Mandela, an amazing man, has, after some time of illness, finally gone to rest and yet we know that as we prepare to bury Mandela next week, this is a man whom history will remember for centuries or more, whose legacy will not die, whose example will continue to

bring hope to so many throughout the world...but more on Mandela later.

Last week we considered faith and faith is closely related to hope. Hebrews 11: 1 tells us, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. Faith gives substance to the things for which we hope. Faith gives us the assurance that we do not hope in vain. Hope, of course, is not the property only of Christians but as Christians we hope in the light of faith, believing that such hope is not mere wishful thinking but is an assurance that the wrongs of this world will be defeated, because that is what Jesus has ushered in through his defeat of sin on the cross. And although we are between, as I said last week, the “now” of the world as it is and the “not yet” of the world as it is promised, we have faith that it is not in vain to hope for a better world, that it is worth striving for peace and justice because our faith in God assures us that even when things are at their darkest, even when a way out of a desperate situation seems impossible, we know that with faith in God it is possible!

This kind of hope has its roots deep in the Jewish scriptures and not least within the writing of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah speaks of one who will come from the stump of Jesse, that

is from the father of David. Jews apply this text to the expected messiah and for Christians we read this as a reference to Jesus, who was indeed a descendant of David. Isaiah is writing at a time when the Israelites were in exile. Some time after they had entered into their promised land, they were the victims of war by surrounding foreign powers and they were taken out of Israel, taken far away where they then captive in Babylon and forced into slavery. It was a very dark time for the people of Israel, reminiscent of their time of slavery under the Egyptians. As the psalmist and Boney M remind us, “by the rivers of Babylon they sat down and wept as they remembered Zion”, remembered the home land from which they were far away. It is in this context that Isaiah says one will come who will bring forth righteousness, “he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.”

Not only this, in the midst of a time when the small nation of Israel was a pawn in wars between the Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian empires, Isaiah says the one to come will bring peace, such that “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and

the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.” What a vision of peace! It would seem impossible and yet Isaiah encourages the Israelites in the depths of their despair to hope for such a peace, to have faith that such a peace will come.

I became involved in the Anti-Apartheid movement when I was about 14 years old. I can't quite remember how but I do remember that it was a decision very much inspired by understanding from the Bible that God loves all, that God desires justice. I saw the terrible injustice of Apartheid, a system not only of racial segregation but rule by a cruel and brutal regime which was known to have tortured and killed thousands of its opponent in South Africa. The struggle was personified by the imprisonment of Mandela, who at that time had been in prison for 23 of his 27 years in captivity. I was involved in various rallies and actions and would regularly join others outside the South African embassy in Trafalgar Square. There we would chant, “a non-stop picket on the embassy, right until the day Mandela's set free”. I must admit, I thought “this is mad!” I could not see an end

to Apartheid, supported even by our own government under Margaret Thatcher; I could not see any prospect of Mandela being released from prison. Nevertheless, I went back again and again to join with others in keeping the hope alive. And I remember so well the day of Mandela's release when I was 18, remember running down to the city hall in Durham where I was living at the time as a student and watching, on a large tv screen, the release of Mandela! Something we thought impossible came to pass!

The role of faith in the creation of the new South Africa should not be under-estimated. Many of the white supporters of Apartheid took their faith seriously, not least the members of the Dutch Reformed Church. They believed Apartheid was Biblical and a lot of work took place between that church and other Christians on convincing them what they finally admitted, namely that they had it wrong. That admission and the eventual renunciation of Apartheid by the DRC made a huge difference as support for Apartheid at home and abroad began to crumble.

And faith played a big part on the attitude Mandela adopted on how to transform a deeply divided society, a society in which the black majority had been oppressed for so many years, a society which could have easily turned those

divisions into civil war. It is well known that Archbishop Desmond Tutu had many conversations with Mandela and is credited with helping Mandela to adopt the attitude of reconciliation for which Mandela became so famous. Mandela forged a country based on the hope that it would be a place of peace for all, black and white, a rainbow nation, with 11 official languages, with a beautiful new flag, with a government of peace and reconciliation, with an embrace of the cultures of all South Africans, symbolised so famously by Mandela appearing the springbok shirt of the all-white South African rugby team! I was in South Africa for three months in 1995, while Mandela was president and it was such a joy to see on the news every day how Mandela was out and about, giving affirmation and hope to a new country.

Of course, Mandela did not solve all the problems of South Africa but he has provided an enduring example of hope, hope that even the most dismal political conflict can be resolved and can be resolved in a spirit of reconciliation and peace. But let me re-iterate, the Christian faith was a critical factor in forging the new South Africa. We have faith that hope is not in vain, that the most challenging situation can be transformed, because we believe that is what Jesus has done for us by his death and resurrection.

What then can we do for Jesus? Let us be beacons of hope, let us bring hope to the darkest of human problems, let us proclaim the hope that is a core element of the Christian faith, let us be Mandela's for our time, let us keep the candle of hope burning, not just this Advent but as part of our commitment to follow Jesus every day, year on year, until we are called to join Mandela and all who've born witness to that hope, in the fullness of the time to come!

Steven Saxby, December 2013.