

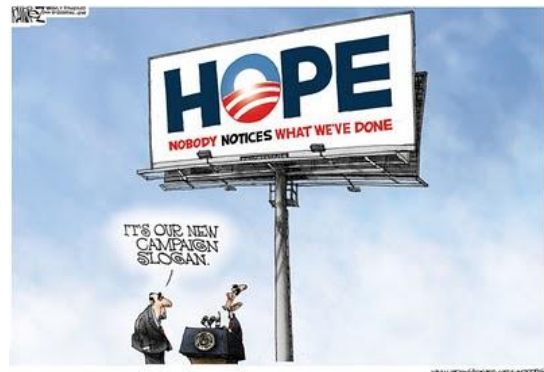
Because we all need Hope

Our Christmas Services adverts are going to be a play on the Coles Supermarket adverts, *Down Down, our God came down*. The other part of their advertising is 'Because we all buy sausages, or " ... pie" but we will have "Because we all need Jesus. That is the whole meaning of Christmas.

As we build up to this during Advent we will be considering other things that we all need, forgiveness, good news, a saviour, but this week. "Because we all need hope."

It seems self evident really, we do all need hope. Without hope the future looks bleak, the past looks far rosier and so we join the ranks of the grumpy. Rather than moving into the future we retreat into the past, rather than living our dreams we seek solace in our memories.

If we are to move forward then we need hope. So promises are often made which are hopeful, but this hope turn out to be illusory or passing. Often such promises are simply attempts to distract us for the unpleasant reality we may be in. I was taken by a cartoon I saw during the week in which there was a big bill board with the word "Hope" written across it in big letters with a politician explaining that it was their new campaign slogan. But written underneath "Hope" in much smaller letters were the words "nobody notices what we've done"



It is quite pertinent that I preach on hope this week, as I have had a really tough couple of weeks. My father has been in a car accident and is in hospital leaving my mum at home, which has all kinds of trials with my own thinking as well as dealing with their personal situation. What does hope mean for my parents? What does it mean for me? I share this not seeking sympathy, for others here will be in far worse situations than me, but simply to say it is a live issue for me and my family right now. We all need hope.

My mind turned to an episode in Anthony Trollope's "Barchester Towers". Rev Harding, the hero of the tale, is depressed thinking about the changes that have happened in his life. "He felt as though the world were sinking from his feet; as though this, this was the time for him to turn with confidence to those hopes which he had preached with confidence to others. 'What,' said he to himself, 'can a man's religion be worth, if it does not support him against the natural melancholy of declining years?'" (Barchester Towers, p86)

So where can we find hope. At the start of Advent we are doing two things we are looking forward to remembering the birth of Jesus when our God came down, but we also look forward to when Jesus will return. It is in this looking back and looking forward that we will find true hope.

Whilst preparing for this sermon I took a book down off my shelf which I was given by a dear friend when I was appointed as Dean. It is a mightily impressively looking tome called *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, which I don't think I have ever taken off the shelf. In some desperation I looked up the article on *Hope* and right at the beginning it said this.

"Hope, in Christian understanding, is a learning to look forward, confident in the memory of what God has already achieved in Jesus Christ, to the fulfilment of God's creation."

It is quite a sentence but it captures perfectly the Christian understanding of hope. I hope to explain it over the next few minutes but if we were to summarise it in a way that sounds something like a Hollywood movie it would be "Remember the Future."

THE ROLE OF REMEMBERING

Throughout the Scriptures the way the faithful find hope for the future is to look to what God has done in the past. It is a constant refrain in the Psalms where in the midst of their troubles God's people look back to the Exodus and God's faithfulness and a Psalm which had started as a lament ends in a riot of praise. This change is not because anything has altered the situation but simply God's people have remembered the nature of their God and so are confident of his good purposes for them into the future.

This is perhaps most clearly put in Lamentations 3:21. "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope" In the midst of the disaster of the Exile and the destruction of the temple he can still find hope because he calls to mind what God has done.

In a twist on the cartoon I mentioned earlier, Hope comes from noticing what God has done. "Hope comes from learning to look forward confident in the memory of what God has already achieved ..." Remember the Future. This is a deliberate act of the will, it is something we learn to do in the midst of whatever may be going on in life. We call this to mind and therefore we have hope

WHEN OUR GOD CAME DOWN

But when we think of what God has achieved we do not look back to the Exodus, or even primarily to special events in our own life but rather what God achieved in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

All the references to hope in the New Testament are firmly based on these events which happened in history. Without these events there is no true Christian hope, and it is in remembering them that we will grasp hope. For here we see God coming into this world, showing his love, his nature, his salvation. In the resurrection we see the foretaste, the first fruits of the promise of new creation where there will be no more crying, mourning or pain, and death will have passed away. In Jesus these are no mere pious wishes which make us feel better in the midst of an unpleasant reality, an opiate of the people, but a real and true hope. This will happen for Jesus came and rose, and so will return.

Again we need learn to live in the light of this memory. We see this in the book of Romans as Paul reminds us that growing In hope is a process. In the light of God's grace suffering leads to perseverance, to character and to hope "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Romans 5:5

I need to remember that this is something I teach myself. Christian hope is something that we grow in as in the midst of our difficulties we come back again and again to Jesus, knowing that he came and he will come back.

As we remember we look to the future, remember the future.

FULFILMENT OF CREATION

So Hope, in Christian understanding, is a learning to look forward, confident in the memory of what God has already achieved in Jesus Christ. But there is a final part in this definition " to the fulfilment of God's creation"

This is a helpful reminder that all of this is part of God's great plan for all of creation, it is not about the abandonment of this world, or our escape from it, but God's great desire to bring order, restoration, and justice to this world.

Advent reminds us of this judgement. We don't think of judgement as a hopeful thing often but it is the more we think about, we all hope that things will be put right. I haven't heard many being upset that the tabloids have been getting some comeuppance lately. We all really long for just judgement, it a great hope.

Because of judgement and the validation of creation and God's purposes for creation shown in Jesus through his resurrection, there is not only the hope of things being put right but there is hope that our actions and our lives matter to God. Those times that we act with love, humility, mercy and justice are important, we do them in hope.

We live in a world where if we were to just look around there may be little encouragement for hope or acting hopefully. But Christian hope is not based on looking to our surroundings but knowing that a better day is coming. The reality of that future impacts how we live now. We cast off the works of darkness in the light of the coming day.

That is why the great prayer for Advent encourages us to throw off the works of darkness. We do so remembering the future.

IMAGES OF HOPE

I pray that this spelling out of the nature of Christian hope will encourage us all to grow in hope and teach us to look forward confident in what God has done. As we close a couple of images that we have in the scriptures that I find helpful and I hope that you will to.

Hope as an Anchor

In Hebrews 6:19 we are told "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." An anchor is a very powerful image as our lives may be going through troubled waters. If we do not have a good anchor we can be washed away. I vividly remember having to swim after our boat which was on its way to New Zealand when we had not properly anchored at Browns Beach in Great Oyster Bay. But what is the anchor that Hebrews is talking of? It is Jesus our forerunner who has gone before us as a sure promise for our future. Interestingly then our anchor is not in the past, but in the future, based on what has happened in the past. An anchor to the future with God surely brings us hope.

Hope as a Helmet

The second image is that of a helmet. Paul writes in 1Thessalonians 5:8 "But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet." Once again this is very powerful image. There is a good reason to wear helmet, to protect the head. The more we understand our hope the better protected our thinking will be.

Hope as Food

The final image of hope is of food. It is the bread and wine which we are soon to share. We do this in remembrance. We do it remembering that the physical nature of the elements point us to new creation, restored creation. We do it remembering Jesus sacrifice and that we are to be living sacrifices. We do it remembering that we do it till he comes. We do it remembering that Christ had died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

The Christian hope is indivisible from the Christian memory. Its memory is its hope. Jesus came because we all need hope. Remember the future.