

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14

27.11.16

Tell them about the dream

You might say that Advent, that season of the Christian year that begins today, is a time of dreams and visions. In the next five weeks that lead up to Christmas we will be reading great passages of Scripture, including several from the prophet Isaiah from whom we have read today, and these passages depict magnificent visions of a world at peace, a world bathed in justice and swathed in wellbeing and ruled over by one who is to come. Some of these passages have become well-known from having been oft-quoted. So, for instance, outside the United Nations building in New York there is what is known as the 'Isaiah Wall' on which is carved words from verse 4 of our reading this morning: 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' And the placing of that text on that wall outside that building in that city speaks volumes about our yearnings for peace. Those words spell out our dreams that one day the world might be at peace and precious resources, instead of being squandered on instruments of death and destruction, might be directed towards food production and tractors and invested in life. And Advent, that season when we prepare for the coming of Christ, the Prince of Peace, is a time for dreaming such dreams, catching such visions.

This passage from Isaiah 2 is one to picture in our mind's eye. Imagine the scene of a great mountain towering high above all the surrounding mountains and hills. This is Mt Zion on which the city of Jerusalem – literally the city of peace and righteousness – is built, with its great temple. And Zion is also the place where the Law of God, the Torah, is heard and embodied in the life of God's people. And as you watch you see vast throngs of people heading towards the mountain, people of every tribe and every tongue. They are heading for Mt Zion because what they can see there and what they can hear there has a tremendous pull on them. They find themselves attracted, drawn to what is offered there:

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...

that he may teach us his ways
 and that we may walk in his paths.
 For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
 and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem...’

And as they come just look at what is happening. The nations of the earth are being reconciled to one another. Peace is breaking out. Swords are being turned into ploughshares, spears into pruning-hooks – and war is being un-learned.

What a vision. One scholar has likened this passage to Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech and there are some interesting parallels that I want to consider for a while this morning. Martin Luther King’s great speech, spoken at the March on Washington and from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28th 1963 was a daring and bold piece of rhetoric. After all, it was written and preached in dark times. These were, or course, the days of the civil rights struggle in the USA. Segregation was still a fact of life in the South and deeply embedded there. In June of that year President Kennedy had proposed civil rights legislation but this was deeply controversial and had stirred up massive opposition. In the months since Kennedy’s national address on the issue here had been 758 demonstrations in 186 cities leading to 14,733 arrests. In other words at this point in time racial tensions were at a pitch, and opposition to the legislation was fierce and the forces of reaction strong and there was no certainty that it would go through. And into that cauldron King flung his dream, drawing deeply on biblical imagery from the prophet Isaiah and elsewhere. But that dream stood in stark contrast to the lived reality of the time. It clashed with the facts of the ground. It clashed with the racial injustice and discrimination that were prevalent and deeply dug in. And it has to be said that the speech did not make a huge impact at the time, going unreported in some major newspapers. Elsewhere the press reacted predictably, venting its hatred. One paper from the South pictured the aftermath of the March on Washington and the litter with the headline ‘Washington is Clean Again with Negro Trash Removed.’

In many ways it’s similar with Isaiah’s vision. This comes at the start of Chapter 2 of the Book of Isaiah with its imagery of Jerusalem as a place where God’s Law was honoured and obeyed. But chapter 1 of Isaiah tells a different story. It contains a bitter denunciation of the Jerusalem of that day, a place filled with injustice, a place where injustice prevailed and where the poor were

trampled upon mercilessly. This Jerusalem, the real Jerusalem of chapter 1, is described as a whore, rife with bribery and corruption and the abandonment of the vulnerable. This Jerusalem, the real, sordid Jerusalem of chapter 1, stands in deep contrast to the glorious visionary Jerusalem of chapter 2 - as much of a contrast as King's speech was to the real America of its day.

And you could ask what long-term effect the King speech had on the nation. Looking at race relations there today, listening to some of the rhetoric of the recent election there, you might wonder if and when the dream will ever come true. Was it just a fantasy? Was it just empty rhetoric? And likewise with Isaiah's vision. When did this vision ever come true and is it ever likely to? Is there not some supreme irony in Jerusalem, of all places, being pictured as a centre of peace and reconciliation? Is not Jerusalem an aching sore in the Middle East? Is it not a symbol of religious division and hatred? Is Jerusalem, and all that it represents, not at the heart of so much of the conflict that extends to Syria and Aleppo and into terror attacks here in Europe? Is Jerusalem not, tragically, a symbol of desperately needed resources being squandered on weaponry and warfare?

Yet, for all that it is a dream in need of fulfilment, King's speech was important. It helped pave the way for civil rights and it has had an enduring effect. During the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 protestors held up posters of King saying 'I have dream'. On the wall Israel built around parts of the West Bank someone has written 'I have a dream. This is not part of the dream.' Who knows how many have been inspired and moved and motivated by King's dream? This kind of rhetoric endures and sends out ripples that become waves.

It's interesting - some of you may know the story of King's speech on that day in 1963. It was a speech that King had given before in varying versions on different occasions. In Washington that day he did not plan to use it - he had another speech which he gave. But as he came to the conclusion of his prepared text he seemed somehow not to have found a way to finish, 'a way to land' as some people put it. And at that moment the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson who had sung earlier and was familiar with his speeches said to King, 'Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!' And whether or not it was Mahalia Jackson's prompting that did it, King put aside his script, gripped the lectern and launched into these famous cadences.

‘Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!’ And we’ve been telling about the dream ever since.

Well, it’s the same with Isaiah. In these early chapters of the Book of Isaiah, having described the tawdry, deathly city of Jerusalem, Isaiah takes off into this glorious, soaring oratory. He tells them about the dream but he does it over and over again in different versions in these opening chapters of the book that bears his name, the chapters that we shall meet on our Advent journey:

‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, upon those who dwelt in deep darkness light has dawned... all the boots of the trampling warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire...’;

‘the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain...’

Tell them about the dream, Isaiah! Tell them about the dream! And it’s interesting that this passage from Isaiah 2 appears again in almost identical form in another book in the Old Testament by the prophet Micah, which suggests that this vision was in circulation in ancient Israel. And we don’t know who actually wrote it but it was known and quoted, the dream repeated. And that dream stands in stark contrast to the world we live in today – the world of Syria and of huge military budgets and desperate poverty and need. And the dream shows precious little sign of coming true. But that is precisely why we need it. When the world continues relentlessly on its way, and when hope seems in short supply, and when we never seem to learn from our mistakes, and when we fear for our children and their future, it’s then that we need these dreams, these visions, glimpses of a different future. We need alternative horizons upon which to lift our eyes. Because make no mistake. These visions are more than hollow fantasies. They are more than empty delusions. These great passages with their dreams of a world to come are conveying to us God’s future, that distant horizon. They are unveiling to us the last day, the final end of all things when all will be well and we need these promises when all is far from well. Such dreams and visions feed our spirits. They nourish our flesh and blood. They fund our imagination. They steel us to keep hoping, to keep praying, to keep struggling for a better world.

Our passage from Isaiah 2 ends with the words, ‘O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!’ Jerusalem of Chapter 1 is at a low ebb, full of darkness and with the shadow of judgement hanging over it. Then

comes this vision in chapter 2 and this summons: walk in the light of the Lord. Walk with little steps, reaching out to God. Walk with little steps of understanding. Walk with little steps of hope and trust in God's future. Walk with little steps, reaching out in peace and forgiveness and reconciliation to those around us.

We need dreams like Isaiah's. They are the stars by which we plot our course. They are the North Pole by which our compass is set. By them we walk in the light of the Lord. Amen.

Sovereign God,

Because you are Lord of all things we dare to dream of a better world.

We dare to dream of an end to war in Syria,

its cities rebuilt and its people no longer living in fear;

and we dare to dream of Jerusalem as a city of reconciliation,

with Israeli and Palestinian living side by side

and no longer in conflict with one another;

and Israel at peace with its neighbours,
no longer fearing attack and obliteration.

And we dare to dream of a world where tractors have priority over tanks;
and where precious resources are directed towards curing disease,
and where children receive education and can look forward
to a secure and prosperous future.

O God, because you are Lord of all things, we dare to dream of such a world.

And we dare to dream of a world where people of different faiths
respect their differences while discovering that they can learn from one another.

And we dare to dream of a church renewed and revived,
where your Word is heard and people are drawn to you,
and the honouring of your commands brings life and liberation

O God, let these not be just dreams.

And bless especially those amongst us in special need at this time:
those living with loss, those living with anxiety,
those facing medical treatment.

Draw near to them we pray and enable them to walk in the light:
the light of peace and hope and joy.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Almighty and gracious God,
pure in holiness and pure in love,
faithful and steadfast in all your ways,
we praise you our Maker,
Creator of heaven and of earth;
And we praise you God
revealed to us in your ancient people of Israel,
and God who has taken flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

On this first Sunday in advent
we worship you, righteous God, God of justice,
God whose glory is revealed in a world
at peace with you and at peace with itself.

And we confess that this is not our world.

We confess at we do not know the things that work for peace

and so we belong to a world of conflict and of chaos,
of bloodshed and war,
where pruning hooks are turned into spears
and ploughshares into swords:
and we your people, on behalf of this world,
confess to you our sins and our folly,
acknowledging our failure to live by your ways,
to honour your commands,
and the way we misuse earth's resources.
Almighty and gracious God,
you come to us and speak words of grace and hope.
You give us dreams of peace and reconciliation to live by;
You come and offer us liberation from sin
and the hope of new beginnings.
So come now, Advent God, wake us from sleep,
Help us to lay aside the works of darkness
And to put on the armour of light.
For we pray in the name of Jesus, our saviour and Lord. Amen.