

Hope and a dead end

It's what you might call a dead-end moment. The armies of Babylon are circling the city of Jerusalem. The streets of Jerusalem will soon be filled with slaughter and the stench of death, and it seems like the end of the story for Jerusalem, the end of the story of the kingdom for Judah, indeed the end of the story for God's people Israel. About 400 years previously God had promised to a king called David that his dynasty would last forever, that his throne was secure. But that promise, like many others, seems now to lie discarded on the scrapheap of history. Israel, David's dynasty - they've hit a brick wall and there's no way through. It's the end. And the prophet Jeremiah in the chapters leading up to our passage has been proclaiming the bad news and that's not good for morale, and he has a reputation for being a pessimist and a whinger and a moaner, so he's been locked up in a prison cell to shut him up. But you can't lock up the truth. A dead-end has been reached – and the mark of a dead end is despair.

Yet into this situation, surprisingly, old misery-guts Jeremiah offers hope: 'In those days... I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David!' The ancient promises to David's dynasty will be revived. It's not the end – the future is still open! God is promising to kick-start something new. Can we believe that Jeremiah the drone is saying this?

Well, there is a history of dead-ends in the Bible, points where a brick wall is reached and if we pay attention we learn that God's speciality seems to lie in offering a breakthrough. When I do my 'exploring the faith' course with people who want to understand the faith better, my starting point is a verse that comes in chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis which refers to a woman called Sarai and which describes her as barren. Nothing very significant about that, you might think. But we note how that verse comes at the end of a section of Genesis which stresses God's repeated desire since the creation of the world that it should be a fruitful place, full of life. And Sarai's barrenness is a comment not just on her womb but on the whole creation which has become infected by death and violence – and become barren. A dead-end has been reached. And yet immediately there follows a promise to this old woman Sarai and her aged husband that they shall be the parents of a great nation that will

bless the world. With God, just when you think a dead-end has been reached, that dead end is breached! So when in due course that same nation migrates to Egypt and is enslaved and oppressed and Pharaoh is unyielding God acts and releases them. And later, long after the apparent dead-end of Jerusalem of Jeremiah's day, we come to the Jerusalem of Jesus' day – and another brick wall. In our passage from Luke's Gospel earlier Jesus is warning of a coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple that will be like the end of the world. And that will happen - but already Jesus knows that through his death and what follows something new will break through. And of course central to the Christian faith is that symbol of the cross – the ultimate symbol of the dead-end: of darkness and despair. But we know what happened next.

So think of dead-ends in our world today. We could think of Syria: cities reduced to rubble, their population dead or flown. We could think of California – great swathes of forest scorched and ruined. Or bring it closer to home: maybe it's a bereavement, the end of a relationship, or a redundancy, or a medical diagnosis: dead-ends. Despair. But God's speciality is breakthroughs.

In Jeremiah's day the image of hope takes the form of a branch that springs up. Imagine in the scorched wasteland of the California forest – a branch, a sign of life! And the thing about a branch is that it's small. Elsewhere in the Old Testament we find the image of the shoot. It's not a tree, it's not a trunk – it's just a shoot, a branch, something small. In other words hope comes in small doses. Everything doesn't change overnight, but hope comes – in small fragments, small sparks bringing light to a dark cell. And that, of course, is the theme of the season of Advent that we embark upon today. When the world seemed to have run out of road, become barren, something new opened up - in a little, vulnerable baby, that righteous branch of which Jeremiah spoke.

But you and I can be that branch too. Maybe it's a hand held by a bedside; maybe it's a letter written to a prisoner like Jeremiah in a cell; maybe it's a word of encouragement to someone who is struggling, or the promise that they will be prayed for; maybe it's not a branch but a bunch of flowers or card or a visit. Little signs of hope, of breakthrough. And this morning we gather here at the table, just as Christ did with his disciples on a dark, dead-end night in Jerusalem. And we celebrate the fact that he is alive and with us here in bread and wine, and they become symbols of newness and of hope, for with God there are no dead-ends. Amen, and to God be praise and glory.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Living God,
on this first Sunday of Advent we praise you
that you have not abandoned this world to its troubles,
and not renounced your promises
to keep faith with your world.

We praise you that you take old things and make them new,
that you take closed doors and open them,
that you breathe new life where there is death and decay.

We pray today for those who may be tempted to despair:
we think of people in California who have lost everything
and are beginning the task of rebuilding their lives;
we think of Syria in its devastation and of those
who have been forced to seek new life in new countries;
we pray for Yemen and for the threat of mass starvation there: please,
Lord, may this catastrophe be avoided.

Lord, in your mercy / *Hear our prayer*

And as world leaders of the G20 nations have been
meeting in Argentina this past week we pray for the
outcomes of this gathering,
that progress will be made towards a more just
and righteous world.

We pray for the ecological challenges that face our world,
our misuse of the planet and our destruction of nature
and we pray that you would help us to change.

O God, through wise decisions of our leaders bring
branches of hope, breakthroughs that will avert disaster,
and a more fair, just and peaceful world.

Lord, in your mercy / *Hear our prayer*

And God we pray for those here today in particular need:
those for whom life seems to have brought them
to a dead end.

For those weighed down with anxiety,

For those bowed own by bereavement and loss,

For those uncertain and troubled about the future,

Bring hope and peace, we pray.