

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 5 DECEMBER 2010

Mr Robert Sanderson

Isaiah 2: 1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13: 11-14; Matthew 24: 36-44

“The Transforming Hope for the World”

Today is the beginning of Advent – a time when we look forward to recognizing the presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth. It is a time filled with anticipation of hope for the realization of the Kingdom. And yet the lectionary readings have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus. The New Testament readings are about the apocalyptic view of the coming of the Son of Man. About how the early Christians saw the fulfillment of God's promise. The Hebrew texts are about Jerusalem and what it might become. What all of these readings have in common is that faith in God is the source of hope. It is important to emphasize that the word faith means *trust*, not belief.

It is also worth noting that the apocalyptic view is different from the prophetic view. The prophets would warn of the consequences of current actions. They indicated what would happen if people continued to follow the course they are on. The aim of this is to have people repent and to return to God's way. The reading from Isaiah contains no threat. The prophet points out in his vision the benefit of following God's way. This is completely different from the apocalyptic view which says that the end of all things is nigh.

It is worth spending some time discussing this 'end time', or apocalyptic, literature as it is called because it does worry many people. It started around 200 years before Jesus and developed long after his death. In scripture, it culminates in the book of Revelation where the second coming of Jesus occurs after the destruction of Rome. In simple terms it says that the wicked had such a control of things and the good people were so desperate that God would intervene, rescue the favored ones, destroy everything else and a new creation would be formed. This is so unlike the peace-loving Jesus that it's almost a vile parody. John Dominic Crossan in *God and Empire* says,

“To turn the non-violent resistance of the slaughtered Jesus into the violent warfare of the slaughtering Jesus is, for me as a Christian, to libel the body of Jesus and to blaspheme the soul of Christ.”

Setting this extreme picture from Revelation aside, let us look at the context of Matthew's gospel. Matthew was writing after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE which started 4 years earlier with the massacre in one day of 3,600 Jews by the Romans. That was a foretaste of what was to come. Matthew's community was also under attack from the successors to the Pharisees and his group of Christian Jews was very much separated from the other communities. Not only were the times awful for Jews in general, but Matthew saw his group being rejected even though they maintained the traditions and the law.

The wish for divine rescue in such times is always imminent. It is usually only a short time away – within a generation or so. The reason for this is that it is a response to the *current* calamity. This leads people to try to read signs and to predict when it would happen so they can be members of the favored ones. It is obvious from Matthew that in his time there were many who tried to read the signs. But he is adamant that no-one can do this. “But about that day and hour no one knows”.

One other example when religious persecution was rife was during the reformation. Our first hymn,

the Lutheran chorale *Wachet auf* was written by Phillip Nicolai in 1598 when a plague swept through his town killing 1300 people.

The great problem with these apocalyptic stories is that people take them literally. When people want to say this is what *will* happen and this is *how* it will happen. The fact is that for all these predictions that have been made, not one has taken place! Paul, for example, was convinced that the great resurrection would be in his lifetime. He was obviously mistaken and no doubt disappointed, but look at the legacy of the communities he started. Both good and evil have flowed from Christianity down the ages. The hope for a better world has continued to inspire the vision of people despite the mistakes. This hope has, like the words of the prophets of old, sustained people through times of great calamity.

The reading from Isaiah 2 records a vision of a time when the people will come to Jerusalem to heed God's way and then there will be no need for any weapons of war – they can all be beaten into instruments used to provide food for the nations. The irony of this passage about Jerusalem speaks volumes to us today. It is clear that the future of Jerusalem has waxed and waned, in both good times and bad, throughout history. The hope of the Jewish people continues to be with them after thousands of years. And yet, even today, when things seem so bleak for the people of Israel/Palestine, there is still the hope that Isaiah's vision will yet come to pass.

It is true that the hope may be frustrated as it has been many times before, but the fact that people hold that hope and use it to continue to work with God in so many ways, inspires more work for peace and justice to be done. I say "work with God" because God is also frustrated when peace and justice fail. While God works with us in ways that surprise us, God actually works through history and not outside it. Here we have a real problem for those who see God as the all-powerful controller of the universe. Those who would want the apocryphal stories to be factual and who believe that God would suddenly intervene and make all things right will find this idea difficult.

At the present time, we all feel acutely for those who have lost loved ones in the Pike River tragedy at Weymouth, NZ. In times of great natural calamity and personal tragedy, God neither causes these events nor prevents them. Calamities are not God's punishment for wrong-doing as some like to suggest. God suffers along with all the victims. But we can be assured, all who suffer can draw strength and hope from God, in the same way that those who would comfort, aid and work to rescue the victims can.

If it were not for our experience of God, we would be tempted to totally ignore these stories of the future and consign them to a way of thinking that is long past. But there is another way that even the apocryphal readings can speak to us. And I think this is what the designers of the lectionary had in mind. They force us to look at the big picture – to broaden our outlook. To heed the call to be watchful. To be alert to the movement of the Spirit. To read the signs when we may be called to reach out to the opportunities that are being presented.

The times when we are anxious or fearful is just the time when we are least likely to be alert because then we become too preoccupied with ourselves. We become drowsy to the needs of others around us. We can even become paralyzed and inert. Sometimes the anxiety can produce the common experience of being blinkered; of focusing on only one thing. This leads to a lack of faith and a blindness to the things that are important or, at least, to prevent us from seeing more viable options. Antonio Porchia once said "If you do not raise your eyes you will think you are the highest point."

Another recent national disaster was the earthquake that so devastated Haiti in January this year.

The current toll is 220,000+ killed; 300,000 injured; 1.5 million living in makeshift shelters. As if this is not enough, as of this week 1,523 people have died of cholera and 27,933 have been hospitalized. There is a projected 200,000 cases over the next 6-12 months. It is not surprising the many aid agencies working there have asked for another \$164 million to combat the outbreak.

This new call for financial assistance comes against the background that only 40% of all money pledged by all countries at the beginning has been delivered. The reporting of Haiti's current plight is hardly newsworthy today. Why is this?

I suspect it is because of two main reasons.

First, the global financial crisis has caused great hardship among the traditional aid-providers of the wealthy nations. The governments of these nations are concerned that their people will want them to help their own citizens before the more desperate Haitians. (We have just had two elections. We know how this happens.) While many may want to put their own first, I am convinced that there are many who will want to help if the plight of the Haitians is effectively brought to their attention.

And this brings me to the second point. Our societies are intimately connected with the public media. Citizens around the world are dependent on being informed of what happens. The formal media (newspapers, TV, radio and their web-equivalents) are guided by how they see their role and how they define news. This will mean that some rate a social conscience higher or lower than others. This is the reality of news organizations in a democracy. It is clear from what happens now, that reporters and journalists are willing and well-able to keep alert to the plight of people around the world.

There is also the dramatic rise in social networking sites. Some concerned individuals have formed sites designed for social action and others choose social justice issues close to their heart. All of these form a practical way of contributing to the needs of disadvantaged groups. And I am convinced that it will be the young who will take the lead and be most alert to those in need when it comes to social networking.

Of course, at a personal level, we are all in this same position in our everyday lives. We can be so pre-occupied with our own fears and worries that we miss an opportunity to help. We can either go through life asleep to the needs of others, or we can be alert and sensitive to those around us. We can also be alert to the awareness of God in our lives, not in some strange nebulous future, but in the here and now. The Spirit can come again and again to fill our lives with compassion.

How about this for an amazing thought?

We may be so responsive to the needs of others that we may even see the divine in them...

And when we do that, we are in touch with the transforming hope for the world.