

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

2nd DECEMBER 2012.

“WE MUST CHOOSE HOPE!”

A paraphrase from Jeremiah 33: 14-16

NARRATOR: In a very difficult time when people felt like things were never going to get better, a prophet called Jeremiah gave words of hope to the people.

JEREMIAH: The days are coming when God’s promises to us will come true. God asks us to believe this, even though times are hard. Look at a tree that has been cut down to a stump. It sends out a new strong branch and continues to grow. This is how we must live. We must choose hope; God says to us, “I will send someone to you who will be a good ruler and who will be fair to all people. The place where you live will be safe and you will live in peace. You will name it ‘God’s Goodness.’ This is my promise to you.”

SERMON We must choose hope!

Our lectionary reading from Jeremiah comes six hundred years before Jesus was born; Jeremiah’s message is not just a preamble to the Gospel reading – Jeremiah has something to tell us about living in the present, about living as people who hold a promise. During the reign of King Josiah Israel had lived in relative peace. After Josiah’s death, a series of inept sons of Josiah inherited the throne, - they were really vassals of the surrounding countries; Jeremiah regards the way the kings and priests of Jerusalem have behaved as one of the major reasons for the disaster – why they became easy prey to the surrounding neighbours. And the people had become interested in wealth and the excesses of high living – they weren’t interested in political affairs. Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and the people were about to go into exile in Egypt, losing everything they possessed – not just the temple which they thought was their insurance, but the city, the king, the priesthood, as well as their homes and families.

Try to imagine what it was like for those who were going through these devastating experiences together with the loss of everything that had been promised by God. They were feeling that their God appeared less powerful than the other gods around. There was much despair, anger, hopelessness, guilt, shame and maybe feelings of rejection of Yahweh as their God. The four chapters of Jeremiah chapters 30-33 are known as the Book of Consolation... to give hope to the people. In chapter 31 Jeremiah lets the people know: yes, your guilt is great, and your slack behaviour – never attending to God’s purposes of righteousness and justice – in political, social, religious or personal terms ----- have brought about the current situation.

Jeremiah says: God will fulfill the promise he has made, through Jeremiah. Literally the translation of fulfilling the promise means God’s good word is given to you. His good, faithful word. Notice that this loving relationship is not dependant upon their behaviour, but entirely through the grace of God, the God who will fulfill God’s promise, who will have mercy on them. Jeremiah’s message is not only that one day there will be deliverance for Judah and safety for Jerusalem, but that a descendant of David will bring it about; there’ll be a ‘righteous’ branch --- that is, a branch that is upright, established in justice and righting wrongs – a branch that conforms to God’s standard and lives in right relationship, fairness and honesty; a branch executing the justice and righteousness that has been expected of the kings all along. There will be political, religious, social and personal reforms.

We've lit our first Advent candle – for the prophets, particularly for Jeremiah: the prophet who reminded God's people to hope, that at this time each year we remember how humankind has been waiting, longing, for justice and righteousness to be seen in abundance. What is hope? What does it mean to live with hope?

'hope' is the thing with feathers –
that perches in the soul –
and sings the tune without the words –
and never stops – at all.

And sweetest – the gale – is heard –
And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land –
And on the strangest sea –
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb – of me.

Emily Dickinson lived in the middle of the 19th century in the US. From a well-to-do family, she had an excellent education; she was lively and sociable as a girl, and wrote poetry from her youth. She became a recluse in later life. In this poem, Emily celebrates 'hope' as a quality of the soul, and ever-present quality. Dickinson suggests that 'hope', 'this little bird' can show up in the most difficult times, is always available, without asking for reward.

Victor Frankl, after WW2, wrote the seminal book: *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl discovered during his time in a concentration camp that those few who somehow managed to survive among those with equal difficulties, were those who exercised the power to choose how they would respond to their circumstances by displaying dignity, courage, and inner vitality. They found a way to transcend their suffering. They all chose to expect a good tomorrow, though there was little promise of one.

They chose to love, however hateful the environment in which they lived. And they grew spiritually, as they affirmed they were more than the product of their circumstances. Their souls expanded somehow, grew larger through suffering. By the term "spirituality" I'm not referring to religiousness, although religion is part of spirituality for those who have a religious faith. Spirituality is about making meaning, reflecting who we are in relation to God, however God or ultimate meaning is perceived by the person, and in relationship with others. It seems to me that they chose to accept the little bird called 'hope', to grow along with this thing with feathers.

Quite a few years ago I came across a paragraph in one of my text books on Ageing and Spirituality, written by Linda Vogel which has continued to illuminate my ministry. (I only discovered this week, searching for more concrete knowledge of her, that I am very much in her mould: Linda is now a retired United Methodist Deacon in the USA.)

I was riveted by this passage: The lone person can only *wish*, for hope cannot be experienced alone, the community is the sustainer and vehicle of hope, humankind always hopes *with*, i.e. for us to have hope, for hope to be built, to grow, to be nourished - we need to be in relationship. It's what we know instinctively, and is one of

the many reasons which draws us to worship week after week – to offer hope to each other – as we live through the delicate tension of existing in the darkness and the light of everyday living with all its joys, disappointments, delights and fears.

Many of us have read *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and perhaps forgotten much of the detail. The young lad Dickon and his friend Mary explore a most wonderful hidden garden. They thought that most branches of the trees and roses were dead – the writer called these branches ‘grey’ – lifeless. Then Dickon took out his knife and cut into a branch, and found a ‘shoot which looked brownish green instead of hard, dry gray’. He was able to assure Mary that, deep inside, the tree is as ‘wick’, as full of life and promise and hope as these two young people themselves. Dickon might be talking about us!

Are we able to see signs of sprouting? Are we looking? When we live and act in hope, when we gather again and again at this table to remember what Jesus did and to know that Jesus is with us once again, we are a people of Advent hope, alive to the challenge from Jeremiah.

What do we do as we wait? I think we began the task of exercising our Christian imagination last Sunday at the Congregational meeting. We heard from Hugo and from Phil – Hugo reminding us that any physical additions to our suite of buildings must come after we are sure of our mission in this part of Boroondarra; and Phil reminding us to be very aware of how dependent we are on rentals from the phone towers. Anneke spoke to us about how it feels like there are some little signs of sproutings, and Nathan presented us with some facts and places where people of different backgrounds are working together in community gardens. Anneke challenged us: are you ready to use your imagination, to hopefully explore some of the small seeds of growth that we are feeling; to spend 2013 exploring ways in which we can relate to the community around us. Maybe a theme like “Cherish the Earth” through Mind, Body, Spirit will give us guidance. After hearing these speakers, the motion we agreed to was: that the congregation embrace change and seek longer term sustainability by endorsing the direction and ideas presented today.” Be prepared, and watch!

In our nation, are we seeing signs of new branches appearing? If you’ve been following this year’s Boyer Lectures by Professor Marcia Langton, chairwoman of Australian Indigenous Studies at Melbourne University, I think you would be aware of signs of hope. Marcia has been outlining so many situations of hope: she is able to refer to the huge change in the Gove peninsula where the new owners of Alcan mining five years ago signed a just agreement with the Yolgnu people – this after many years, almost 40 years, when the Yolgnu people had been marginalised in their own country, with devastating effects on the community. Now, Professor Langton perceives a new period of co-operation and development emerging. Galurrway Yunupingu has led the development of enterprises where Yolgnu companies are employed in clan projects which sub-contract to the mine: this is the first time in two generations when workplace relationships of such co-operation have occurred. Professor Langton laments the loss of understanding from some parts of the environmental movement: she experiences this agreement as building a world where work, wealth and culture are co-existing. Sounds much like Isaiah’s prophecy in chapter 11: there will come a time when the wolf and the lamb will lie down together,

I’m holding my breath that politicians of both sides of parliament will stick to their fine words about the National Disability Insurance Scheme --- it’s going to need the goodwill of every politician to re-adjust budget spending to find the \$8 billion needed to over-haul

national disability services.

In the world around us, what signs are there that righteousness and justice are sprouting? It's very hard to be sure. This past year Europe and the Middle East have had cash crisis problems in Greece, Portugal and Spain, and terrible fighting and bloodshed in Syria, Lebanon, and so seriously and sadly, in the Gaza strip.

I'm sure many of you were halted by the 'in-your-face-ness' of Leunig's cartoon in The Age on 21st of November – making us recall the words of Pastor Martin Niemoller, the German pastor, who lamented that many of his fellow citizens kept quiet during the Nazi regime. Leunig was forcefully suggesting that a similar fear of speaking out was afflicting the people of the First World who, he felt, were ignoring the plight of the families living in the Gaza strip.

I've been struggling to understand the way various countries were going to vote, or not vote at the UN last Friday: what did it mean for our country to abstain from voting. I felt there are some signs of righteousness and justice appearing when I heard our Foreign Minister Bob Carr say: "we abstained. We did it as a friend of Israel, (although) more than a little impatient with the settlement activity that is making the two-state solution more difficult." There are so many issues within issues which must be part of the delicacy with which strings are being plucked over this issue. Pray God that the vote to have Palestine as Observer status is a pregnant portent in the lands so close to God's heart.

Craig Mitchell, one of our Uniting educationalists, has written a hymn which compares us in our passion and hope to the lighted candle: "see the hope that burns in darkness, be God's hands and voice and eyes, we are called to live the passion, hope stands strong against all pain, for it's only in the burning that the candle shows its flame".

May hope, the thing with feathers, and hope, the flaming candle, live in your hearts now and through these weeks of waiting. Amen.

Rev Deacon Jenny Preston, North Balwyn UCA, December 2, 2012