

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
ADVENT 1
SUNDAY 1 DECEMBER 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Isaiah 2: 1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13: 11-14

“Psalm 122”

Psalm 122 is one of the so called “Pilgrims” Psalms. A psalm composed for Pilgrims, to be sung on their way to Jerusalem. It is a “nearly there” psalm, that portrays pilgrims not somewhere in the hazardous, mountainous wilderness surrounding Jerusalem, but with feet standing within the gates. The city is within touching distance, its gates and walls ready to enclose the pilgrims in a warm, safe, and peaceful embrace after an oftentimes long and exhausting journey.

Comfortable beds and good food are beckoning!

We encounter a similar sentiment in the passage we read from Paul’s letter to the Romans. He uses the imagery of day breaking, of a beautiful new day dawning in the Eastern sky. Of a world, and it’s people, waking up from the darkness of death to the glorious resurrection future of Jesus Christ.

And last but not least there is the dream of Isaiah. Who paints the vision of what is to come so vividly one can virtually hear and smell the blacksmiths at work refashioning swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks in the midst of throngs of people of every colour and race streaming to the mountain of the Lord, singing, dancing and celebrating peace and justice come.

And want it or not, reading it, most of us will feel our hearts be touched by glimmers of contagious hope and excited expectation.

Nearly there! These texts seem to say, nearly there. Just a little while longer and war and suffering will be no more.

Nearly there? I don’t know about you, but sometimes I wonder. Will that time ever come? Our feet ever be inside the gates of that promised future, will justice and peace ever reign, the nations ever unlearn war?

It certainly doesn’t look like it!

And we may wonder, where Isaiah, where Paul, where the psalm writers, found the hope, the courage, the confidence and the faith to come up with these strong words and images of future redemption, of light dawning in the darkness, of impending change. It’s not because their times were any better than ours, I can assure you. A couple of verses before Isaiah shares the majestic dream of all the world streaming in peaceful happy throngs to the mountain of the Lord he writes this:

Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the Lord,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged!

.....

The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint.
From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and bleeding wounds;
they have not been drained, or bound up,
or softened with oil.

Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

.....

If the Lord of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah

Not a happy picture, and, unfortunately, very like what is presented to us in the news bulletins of our own age. Iniquity, evil, corruption, sickness, bruises and sores, bleeding wounds, desolate countries, Sodom and Gomorrah.

Nothing has changed! Three thousand years and it is all still the same.

And we know it wasn't any different in Paul's day. In spite of the Pax Romana people suffered, poverty, injustice, war, famine, sickness reigned. The forces of death forever laying in wait.

Both Isaiah and Paul write their words in the midst of a reality that is as challenging and difficult as our own. A reality they counter with words of hope and the dawning of a new day. Of a different world where peace and justice, wholeness and love have changed the lives of all people and nations.

Empty hope? Unattainable peace? Pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps? Denial even of what the world is really like?

Collectively, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, our response to this bleak and challenging reality, is even older than the words of biblical writers like Isaiah and Paul.

We look towards Christmas longing for light, for the bleakness of this world to lift, if only for a little while, in a frenzy of candles, baubles, tinsel and evergreen wreaths. Anything to drive away the depressing thoughts of a world still wrapped in darkness and hold on to glimmers of light and hope for a new day, for warmth and abundance belying the stark reality around us.

For four weeks, or even longer, we, collectively, drown ourselves in decorated streets and shops, the ubiquitous carol music, the Christmas parties and get-togethers, preparing food, buying presents, writing cards, support charity and organise what we hope will be happy, joyful, hope and fun-filled events.

Empty? Some of it, yes. Is the peace we feel should descend an unattainable reality? Probably, yes. Pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps by letting ourselves be taken in by the general atmosphere of sparkle and obligatory laughter? I am sure.

And yet. Somewhere in all that frenzy, in all the complexity of longing and trying and working hard to make this the best Christmas ever, hope will touch us, light will glimmer through, somewhere we will catch a few

tones of the Angel's song, because our hearts are hankering after it, longing for it, straining to catch even the smallest particle of stardust descending on the stable.

We will find ourselves standing within the gates, feeling the warmth and safety of the love of God descending on and around us. We will catch a glimpse of that city, that world, where things are different, where war is no more, where death will no longer break in and people no longer be subjected to devastation and ruin.

The Jerusalem of the pilgrims in the psalm was not the heavenly Jerusalem of Revelations. It was a real city, not an ideal one. A city like ours with all the contradictions and paradoxes that come with it.

A city the pilgrims journeyed to, to seek justice in its courts, buy goods in its markets, share news and enjoy the fellowship of others who had also travelled a long way, and last but not least, spend time together in the worship centre of their day.

They would come to the city very much like we come to Christmas: Hoping they'd find justice, peace, fellowship, do some shopping and be able to engage in meaningful worship and come out the other end nurtured, justified, and with the glow of companionship and blessings received around them.

And, with their feet standing within its gates, that's what their song would be about: the hope and expectation that they would find peace, would find hope, justice, security, fellowship, and goodness.

We're nearly there says Paul. The day is dawning! We are standing with our feet within the gates. So lift up your hearts and start living that reality you so long for. Start celebrating, even if there doesn't seem to be anything to celebrate just yet. Living the future with hope and expectation will bring us even closer to that moment where we might step over the threshold and find we are there.

Come, dream, says Isaiah. I know the world doesn't look like it's going to happen any time soon. But I tell you, if you start living as though it will, start beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, the future will start eating into the present and you'll find yourself standing within the gates of hope for a different, altogether better world.

Come, let us decorate our homes and streets, our shops and restaurants, let us give to charity and call for peace, let us live as though the time is here and make that dream, that future, leak into our present so the world will, for a couple of weeks at least, look, feel, behave like a better place. Living from a future that is yet to come, but longs to break into our reality, like a child born to grow away the darkness. Amen.