

Hope: Defiant and Celebratory

A sermon on Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13 & Matthew 3:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 4 December 2022

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Message

Our sure hope of a new future brought to fulfilment in the coming Christ inspires and empowers us to live now in ways which resist the despair and selfishness of our age and anticipate the peace and righteousness of the coming age.

Sermon

One of the challenges I've been facing in myself for a long time now has been accepting that I can't change all the things I'd like to change about myself by simply making a commitment to change and working hard at it. When I was young, I always assumed that anything was possible if I just put in enough effort. But as I've got older, I've repeatedly run up against the limits of that cherished myth. There are things about my world and about my own inner make-up which I do not have the power within myself to control and change.

Now, given that there are plenty of things that need to change in me if I am ever to be the person God created me to be, there are at least two different ways I could respond to this recognition of my own powerlessness. I could despair, assuming that the changes will never come to be, and probably just let my selfishness have free rein to milk every situation for whatever transient pleasures and benefits I could get for myself without much regard for the long term effects on myself or anyone else. After all, if I can never overcome my own weaknesses, I might as well make the most of them.

Alternatively, I could respond to this recognition of my own powerlessness by entrusting my future into the hands of another whose power is greater than mine, and living in anticipation of the changes which will be wrought in me by the other.

Now that is nice and easy to say in theory. The challenge is to ensure that I'm not kidding myself that I'm doing the latter while actually doing the former. I could talk the talk about entrusting myself to God but really just be kidding myself while actually succumbing to cynicism and selfishness.

Now I say these things by way of introduction, because I think that these challenges which face me at a personal level can also be seen to be facing us all at a global and cosmic level. The world we live in desperately needs major changes in its inner life if it is to even survive, let alone become the world God created it to be, but we do not have the power to simply work hard and bring those changes about by our own power. How are we to respond?

Even if we don't scale up all the way from the personal to the cosmic, we find the same challenge at various levels.

We in the Christian Church in the western world are faced with the fact that the Church is currently going backwards at a great rate. It desperately needs to change, but even though some of us may occasionally be able to bring about some measure of change in a local congregation somewhere, the Church as a whole is still in desperate trouble. But when faced with the entrenched cultures of church institutions, do any of us feel that we have the power,

even as a group, to bring about the changes that are needed? Any such delusions usually flicker and die when tested against reality.

The problems at these various levels of reality are somewhat inter-related. Part of the reason the churches are in so much trouble is because so many of us in them are using Christian worship and fellowship as little more than a kind of spiritual and psychological pain-killer to help us cope with the anxiety and despair we feel over the state of the world and the state of our own spirits.

We talk the talk of putting our trust in God for the salvation of the world and of our souls, but for most of the week we are desperately trying to save ourselves by holding together the growing demands of the job and the family and the rent and the lifestyle, running the treadmill ever harder because we are sure that if we fall behind we will slip through the widening cracks in the fabric of our society and slide into the hell of redundancy, emotional breakdown and despair.

Against these nightmare scenarios, our scripture readings speak a message of hope, but it is a hope that doesn't remove the challenge. It is a hope that continues to call us to entrust ourselves and our world into God's hands, and then to actually live on the basis of that hope, rather than talking the talk while living in despair.

The Apostle Paul tells us that the scriptures which were written in former days, were written for our benefit, so that by their encouragement and by steadfastness we might have hope.

And the example we have heard tonight of the scriptures written before the time of Paul to encourage us and give us hope, the passage from the prophet Isaiah, gives us this extraordinarily utopian vision of a world of such peace and harmony that the dingo and the joey lie down together and a snake pit becomes a safe place for children to play and lead around their pet crocodiles. There is no hurting or destroying, and the world is full of justice and righteousness and wisdom and understanding. What can we say before such a vision but "Come, Lord Jesus, Come!"

But what are we actually to do with such a vision? How is it to be anything other than a cloud of fantasy to stick our heads in when the harsh realities of this life threaten to overwhelm us? Because after all, we are completely powerless to bring it about. Our best efforts are seldom enough to get the members of our own families to lie down in peace, let alone the dingo and joey, or the yuppie and the bogan, or the Catholic and the Pentecostal, or the Israeli and the Palestinian. All our evangelism and social welfare initiatives and political activism and United Nations conventions and conflict resolution workshops have not seemed to make a dent in the tide of hatred and hostility and despair. What are we to do with a vision that so successfully eludes our best endeavours?

The answer, according to John the Baptist, is "Repent. Repent." Now probably to many of you that sounds a bit like beating yourself up. The language of repentance has come to sound to our ears only like guilt and shame and trying to be good. And what's more, it is trying to be good by our own efforts again, by just trying really hard and probably being very unhappy in the process and very unhappy with the results. "Repent" does not sound like good news in any way shape or form.

But perhaps that's not what John was saying at all. Perhaps that's really just a few centuries of moralistic crap from a corrupt church hierarchy that had a vested interest in keeping us thinking that nothing could ever change but that we'd better obey them anyway. Always be suspicious of those who tell you that nothing can change when they are benefiting nicely out of things being the way they are. John was certainly not popular with the entrenched religious hierarchies, so perhaps when he said "Repent" he meant something a bit different from them.

The word "repent" simply means to turn around, or to do an about face, or to change direction. And sure, if you're on your way to Bali for some fun in the sun and you have to turn around, that may not be too attractive. But if your life is doing ninety mile an hour down a dead end street then turning around suddenly looks like heaven on a stick.

"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near," says John. This is not "repent" as in "give up everything that's good in life." This is "repent" as in "don't miss the boat. Don't miss the opportunity of a life time. The Kingdom of Heaven is near, so don't get left behind." This is "repent" as in "Prepare the way of the Lord. Get everything ready for his coming."

So what we are talking about here is not about trying to be nice instead of naughty so that some cosmic Santa Claus won't withhold the goodies from us. What we are talking about here is realigning our expectations and realigning our lives in line with an alternative reality which is coming to be in the resurrected and returning-in-glory Christ. This is about reorienting our lives because we have encountered one who has risen from the dead and thus blown away all our previous expectations of what might be possible. This is about placing our hope in Christ, here and now, and beginning to live accordingly.

But if by "hope" we just mean a vague wish that one day everything might change for the better, then we'll probably be back kidding ourselves; talking the talk while still living in despairing slavery to the dominant lifestyles of the society around us. The "hope" to which we are called is a much more powerful and life reorienting thing than that.

We are called to a hope that is a bold and forceful protest against the cynicism and callousness and greed. We are called to a hope that refuses to be sucked in to the dominant ideology with its constant message that we dare not entrust ourselves to anything other than what we can manufacture and purchase and control.

This is not so much about just looking forward to the day when all will be well, but about living now in response to the first fruits of that day, and indeed living *as* the first fruits of that day. John does not say "Repent for the kingdom of heaven will come near one day." He says, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

In Jesus the culture of God has appeared in the world. In the resurrection of Jesus, the powers of death and despair have been broken. In the pouring out of his Holy Spirit, we have been set free to live under the new order. In bread and wine at the Lord's table, we taste the first fruits of the coming joy. The kingdom is now, and the fact that we still live surrounded by the unwitting subjects of another defeated kingdom need not deter us from celebrating the victory of our coming king here and now.

And celebrate we will. Celebrate, precisely because we know that we are powerless to turn the world around but we are being turned around by the one who is turning the world around.

So we celebrate by hearing these stories and rejoicing that next to the resurrection of the crucified one, the lion laying down with the lamb is a piece of cake.

We celebrate by loving one another and resisting the script that says we should see one another as competitors.

We celebrate by welcoming those who are feared as a threat to our national security or to the health of the family or to our way of life and, in the name of the one who was demonised and victimised for us and by us, refusing to demonise and victimise and exclude anyone any more.

We celebrate by joyously refusing to live in fear and isolation and desperate selfishness.

And we do all these things, not because we are under any illusion that by our efforts we can sort ourselves out or make the world a better place, but because we are greeting the coming of the one who can and will.

Jesus is risen. The Spirit is poured out. The kingdom starts now. Let us turn our lives around and align ourselves with the one who reigns in love and justice. Let us sing and celebrate. Let us pray that all the world might be gathered into the communion of our God. And let us raise our glasses and celebrate the hope that we can live by now, until he comes.