**29th November 2015**

**Isaiah 9.2-7**

There is a saying: ‘Better to light a candle than curse the darkness’.

Several people are associated with this proverbial saying, notably John F. Kennedy. It was brought to the public's attention by Peter Benenson, who as a Christian and a lawyer became the founder of Amnesty International. Benenson used it at a Human Rights Day ceremony on 10th December 1961. The candle circled by barbed wire has since become the society's emblem.

Darkness has long been a metaphor for ignorance or evil. The Bible contains hundreds of references to darkness, referring either to the period of ignorance before the realization of faith (that is, prior to 'seeing the light'), death, or to the Devil (The Prince of Darkness);

And it is in a religious context that the phrase is first found in print. The English Wesleyan minister William Lonsdale Watkinson used the expression in The Supreme Conquest, and other sermons preached in America, 1907:

‘But denunciatory rhetoric is so much easier and cheaper than good works, and proves a popular temptation. Yet is it far better to light the candle than to curse the darkness.’

At the moment there are thirteen young people and five adults going from this church to Nicaragua in the summer to work with the Peace and Hope Trust in one of the poorest countries on earth among communities who scavenge for a living on rubbish tips and break stones in a quarry for less than a dollar a day. Poverty is worth fighting against and what we as a team will do next summer is build a school for the families of some of the poorest to get an education. We will also lead a children’s bible club to offer them a deeper hope for their lives in a saviour of all the world. You could say it’s a drop in the ocean – but the ocean is made up of drops and I think it’s better to light a candle than curse the darkness. Practical hope will combine with spiritual hope.

On my last Sunday off during my sabbatical I went to my parents in law’s church in Ross on Wye. The Baptist church there encourages people like we have started to do to share with the congregation blessings they have received or testimonies to how God has been at work in their lives. Not use to this procedure there was an anxious shuffling in the seat at that point in the service where there was an open mike. But then a man sod up and shared how he often have bouts of dark depression when he feels that life is not worth living. The darkness closes in on him. He is still struggling to overcome these feelings but he wanted people to know that Jesus is Lord. No matter what his feelings and emotional state, it could not deny that Jesus is Lord and he came to testify that even in dark times to put your trust in Christ.

As he sat down another woman stood up and went to the front. She said that she was from Sweden and they were passing through the town and had asked at their hotel about any churches they could go to. They decided to come to this church this morning and inspired by the honesty and vulnerability of the man who had spoken about his depression she went on to share about her son. He was a journalist but had a drug addiction for the last 20 years that intermittently has interrupted his career and his personal life. She said she prays for him every day and tries to phone him every day to say she loves him. At that point she just burst out in tears and the rest of us in the congregation did too. We felt her pain and her longing. The minister called the elders forward and they knelt down around her and prayed to God for God’s deliverance for this man. It was a moving experience.

Both these individuals, the man coping with depression and the woman still hoping that her son would kick his drug habit where stark examples of Christian hope. Despite their bleak situation they kept trusting in God and hoping for the future.

The prophet Isaiah wrote that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. John writes at the start of his gospel that a light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Both readings are readings of hope, trying to encourage God’s people not give up, not to be overwhelmed by the darkness but to wait for the light in their situations to dawn on them.

Hope is a positive word. It is said that a person cannot live for 40 days without water but they can’t live for 24 hours without hope.

There is a common yearning in most people that things could be better. Later this week delegates from most countries in the world will meet to discuss Global Warming and its consequences. There is a hope that we may be able to agree on emissions and thus limit the dangerous rises in world temperatures.

We are aware of other global evils that threaten our lives. Terrorism has been much in the news and the dilemma of ow to respond to jihadis, raging unthinking religious fundamentalism. Economic justice is sought for against the apparent uncaring and irresponsible materialism and capitalism in the world. It doesn’t take a PhD in macro economics to know that if the rich are getting richer by the minute and the poor poorer there is something badly wrong. Tax credits may not have been axed and funding for the police maintained but your local council will see big slashes in spending which will disrupt social care services – hitting those who need them most. I could go on about what is wrong I the world but you can tune in every night and watch the news. It can lead you to believe the world is a dark place needing some light.

At the level of the personal there is so much disappointment in life that we can be left feeling hopeless. I read an article written by Sylvia Sands[[1]](#endnote-1) who described the breakup of her marriage. ‘I lost my husband my home, my children (though they had flown the nest by then anyway) I ended up homeless and on the dole in Belfast. I was so lonely. I felt God had let me down. He said 'I will never leave you nor forsake you’ But he has me. It was the lowest point in my life. I was desperately disappointed in everything.

But then astonishingly came what she calls the liberation of failure. She writes:

‘I think failure can be liberating thing, because I was left with the possibility of finding out who I really am, and what I really want to do. There’s that song ‘Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose’ and there’s a liberation in failure where you stop asking the wrong things of yourself. I think sometimes disappointment comes when we simply ask the wrong things of ourselves. ‘

When we are disappointed, hope can take the form of setting different goals and objectives. The process of taking up new opportunities and insights may involve accepting that an earlier chapter in our lives is now closed.

Hope is an advent theme. Today we remember the promise that Jesus will return again.

The Christian story has the resurrected Jesus ascending to heaven and one day will return. The Second Advent. He will come again to judge the living and the dead as the creed says. Jesus will personally be present with us again.

As I have spelt out on the recent Re Reading Romans study nights, at the time of Jesus, contemporary Judaism believed in a complete event in the future when all the righteous would be raised. It was a 2 Step belief: First would be mortal death and whatever happened immediately afterwards. This was often described as Paradise or heaven: like a blissful garden – a place of rest before resurrection; So Jesus talks to the thief on the cross and says as they are dying: today you will be with me in paradise. In John 14 Jesus says there are many dwelling places in my Father’s house: the word used here for dwelling place means a temporary lodging before final destination. The second stage would be judgement at the end of the world and those who are in Christ will also share in his resurrection and go on to a new bodily existence in a newly re-made world. Resurrection does not mean going to heaven after you die BUT coming to bodily life again after bodily death. Christ the one who goes before us: as he dies so we die. As he rises – so we trust in God to raise us also.

If you don’t have faith in God, if you are not in Christ, then you throw yourself on the mercy of God. All is grace – even those of us who have put our faith and trust in Christ can make no demands – all life is by the grace of God. But as a Christian preacher I am not at liberty to tell you anything other than what scripture makes clear: trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Anything else is wishful thinking and your eternal destiny is at stake so I won’t fudge this or be vague. But what a wonderful future we have, what a wonderful hope.

I remember one speaker [[2]](#endnote-2)telling a story of how as a boy his mother explained that if he ever needed help, he should dial ‘O’ for operator and ask for information. One day when the boy’s mother was a way his pet canary which always sang for him seemed to be sick and unable to sing. He remembered what his mother had told him and he dialled ‘O’ for operator, asked for information and explained that his canary was ill. The operator, who happened to now a lot about canaries, gave him some helpful advice and it wasn’t long before the canary was singing again.

Thereafter every time he was alone and needed help, the boy would dial ‘o’ for operator. Since he lived in a small town it was the same operator who answered every time. One day his canary died and the boy called the operator, who had become his friend, and asked if there was anything he could do to bring his canary back to life again. The kind woman simply comforted him and told him ‘remember this: there are other worlds in which to sing’.

Years later after the boy, now a young man, returned from his university studies, he remembered the kindly operator and decided to call her again. A woman answered and he explained who he was and told her how helpful her predecessor had been whenever he needed help.

The woman said, ‘I was told by Mrs Jones, the former operator, that someday you might call again. She told me about you when she was very very sick. Mrs Jones has passed away, but she told me that if you ever called, I should tell you to remember that there are other worlds in which to sing. And she wanted you to know that what was true for your canary was also true for her.’

We have a wonderful hope that we may sing in another world after judgement by the one who will come again.

Judgement was positively longed for hope in NT, to put right rebellion and injustice. When the followers of Christ were being persecuted and killed, thrown to the lions, crucified and set fire to in the Roman arenas they longed for judgment and vindication. The Book of Revelation is written in that context.

Today the Syrian Christians at risk of being beheaded by Islamic State are praying ‘Come Lord Jesus Come’. The Christians in South Sudan starving because of famine and unnoticed on Western media are praying for deliverance ‘Come Lord Jesus Come’. Those children breaking stones in a quarry in Nicaragua for less than a dollar a day in the humid heat only to go home to a tin shack with no running water – those children who our team will meet next summer - are longing for a new creation – ‘come Lord Jesus Come’. While we in the pampered and indulgent West have the luxury of not believing in God and giving up on God because we have heaven now, the thought of judgement makes us queasy – perhaps because we fear being on the wrong side of it. When I was hungry… when I was naked... when I was thirsty… Did you ….. Were you a light to the nations, did you share my good news and persevere in my church…. Judgement is perhaps not what we look forward to compared with other Christians in other contexts and times. At least our Judge is a Man of Sorrows and lover of sinners.

He is our hope. He is the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace.

When I was in Israel this summer I visited the Nasser family who put a name and a face on the conflict there and the hope for that land. They are Palestinians Christians who have lived simple lives off the land for generations until recently Israeli settlements have been built all around them and the Israeli government continually tries to take their land off them. I mentioned them in a previous sermon how they have founded the Tent of Nations to foster reconciliation. And how the sign at the front of their farm says ‘we refuse to be enemies’. One time their olive trees were uprooted by Israeli settlers. A Jewish group caught wind of it and came and helped them replant them all. They extend a welcome to their neighbouring settlers despite this provocation. One of the settlers took them up on their offer of dinner. When she came into their house she started weeping and said ‘you have no water, and we have swimming pools something is wrong. And when she asked how they retain hope in the midst of such injustice the Nasser’s simply said ‘Jesus’ with a big smile.

He is the light in our darkness, the light that will never be overwhelmed by the darkness. Look for his light in your lives. If you are in darkness - trust and hope that you will sing again.

Questions:

1. Is it better to light a candle than curse the darkness?
2. When you have experienced disappointment how do you find hope?
3. How do feel about judgement and the Second Coming of Jesus?
4. What is your Christian Hope? Is it all ‘pie in the sky’ when you die?

1. Rosemary Harthill, Were you There, SPCK 1995555, p 88 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tony Campolo, Stories that Feed the Soul, Regal, 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)