

Bennochy church: 3rd December 2017

If you were going to proclaim some good news, where would you go? I suspect it would not be to the top of a high mountain, or at least the Lomond hills! Not in this weather anyway! There to shout into the wind, what you wanted to share with the world. Who would hear you?

In the comfort of your own home, you might go onto social media, or maybe pick up the phone or you might pay someone a visit. You have something to share. Something is happening. Something is imminent. It is good news and you want other people to hear about it.

That would make a change, would it not, from what we hear every day. I suspect though, we don't watch or listen for good news, there is something in tragedy that holds us in its grasp. For example, I remember watching the TV for hours, as the twin towers terrorist attack unfolded, not seemingly able to concentrate on anything else. I do wonder, if all the news was good, would it bore us? Just a thought.

The prophet Isaiah, gives us this great image of the people of God, Jerusalem, going up onto a high hill and there proclaiming good news, their God is coming! Here's a question, why did they need to hear good news, at that moment in their history?

So let's take a step back in time. The writer of this passage is addressing the exilic people of Israel who are now living in Babylon, after the destruction of Jerusalem round about 586 BC. The northern kingdom of Samaria had already been destroyed by the Assyrians in the 8th century BC.

If ever there was a people who needed hope, it was the people of God. They were living in exile with a sense of broken promises. Where was their God? Why did he not protect the holy city of Jerusalem? Did God not reside in the temple they had built for him? They were also living with a sense of failure and shame. They have broken the laws of God and not lived as God would have wanted them to. They were to be a light to the nations, but now here they are, a broken, exilic people, far from home.

Then prophet says to them, in spite of all that has happened, there is good news! Do not be afraid. Their God is coming to rule with power and rescue his people. Do you see the parallels, with the story of the angel who spoke to Mary. Do not be afraid. I bring you good news.

I think the prophet has his hands full here. This is no easy task. To create a message of hope in a place of despair. To rescue a people who held no power, and who could not change or alter their own circumstance. They are a slave people. I think of those

who lived, died and a remnant who survived, the Nazi concentration camps. How do you bring a word of hope into such a dark place? I think of refugees struggling to live and survive in camps around the world. What possible place can there be, for words of good news in such human misery and to them, what would good news sound like?

In times of greatest darkness, the light of good news seems to flicker. It is part of humanity, that desire to want to survive, even against the greatest of odds. The people of God had no right to hold onto this hope of rescue. What was the point? It all seems so futile. This was a people defeated in battle and lost in exile.

In such times, you want someone to care for you. To be your shepherd and to say, don't worry, I will gather you into my arms and I will lead you home. You are safe now. That is what you want to hear. Life can be a living hell, or at least there are moments when it is hard to face the future. Into that void, in exile or in pain, God speaks words of hope and compassion.

The impact of this story is lost on us. We know how it ends. The remnant people had to wait. A whole generation or more would never come home. It was only after a period of about 80 years, a remnant returned home to a broken Jerusalem. Hope is not always fulfilled in the present. Remember Moses, he saw, but he never entered the Promised land. It was still to come. It would be a land for others to claim.

At this time of Advent, the people of God are still waiting. For the event that has already happened, the nativity of the Messiah, and at the same time, a promise of hope, yet unfilled. Advent is all about the Kingdom of God. It is here, yet it is still to come.

Hope is here matched here with tenderness, as the prophet introduces the well known image of the shepherd. We are already jumping ahead of this story. We understand this prophecy, not as hope lost in the midst of time or despair in some exilic land, but in the fulfilment of the birth of a child.

Jesus knew of these great prophecies, and he claimed the image of the shepherd for himself. He said "*I am the good shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know the Father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them.*"

This Advent time, let us go to the mountain top and proclaim the good news of God. Christ is coming. Alleluia. Amen.