



Sermon preached on Sunday 27 December 2020 by Revd Elizabeth Caswell

Isaiah 61.10-62.3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4.4-7; Luke 2.22-40

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8: 22 – 25)

What a wonderful year this has been! You don't agree? No, neither do I! And yet...in amongst the storms and floods of February, the forest fires in Australia and America, the global pandemic with over 64,000 dead in this country alone, the ongoing uncertainty of the ending of the Brexit transition period, the strains and stresses on families and those alone, yet there have been good things, signs of hope. We have seen financial support of an unprecedented level for individuals and businesses; we have seen communities pulling together to help the vulnerable; we have seen amazingly generous hard work by those on the front-line, be they care and health workers or transport and shop and delivery workers. These folk risked their lives for the rest of us – some gave their lives. We have seen scientists pull out all the stops to find vaccines, and thousands of people take part in trials of these potential life savers. And, perhaps less exciting but really important, we have seen millions of everyday folk like us abiding by restrictions, developing new ways of worshipping and socialising and helping each other, just in order to keep people safe. There has been sacrifice; it has been hard; yet there has been light shining in the darkness.

Our readings today point to the need for believers to exercise patience and live in hope. The two things go together, for hope always points us forward towards that which must be awaited, which therefore requires patience. Simeon is the flag-bearer of patience: he lived in the general hope which all believers have of God's ultimate fulfilment of the promises of righteousness prevailing (“the consolation of Israel” Luke calls it), of God being all in all. He also lived in the specific hope of the fulfilment of God's particular promise to him – he would not die until he had seen the messiah! We are not told how old he was but the implication is that he was pretty old, ready to go, 'come on, hurry up Lord' sort of ready. He was so thrilled to see and hold and recognise Jesus as the Lord's Messiah: “Now”, now you are dismissing me, now I can go, in peace, at peace, because I have seen what You promised...Your great salvation. And this is for everyone – I had thought it was just about Israel, but no, it's for all peoples (Gentiles)> This is revelation (epiphany)...yes we are on the cusp of the next church festival, Epiphany.

For Mary and Joseph this was all a bit of a shock, and that was before the old lady turned up, reinforcing the revelation with her prophetic insight. But what for Simeon and Anna was the welcome ending of a long wait, for Mary and Joseph was the beginning of their own demanding wait for prophecy to be fulfilled, and for the awful cost of being the Messiah, and the Messiah's parents, to be lived out.

We think pregnancy is quite hard work, all about waiting in hope; and then labour of course with its risk and pain; but nothing can equal the shock to the system of actually becoming parents – the mind-numbing tiredness of the early weeks/months, and then the realisation that this is what love is, this is for ever. It never stops. When Paul tells us that God has adopted us, has chosen to parent us, that we are loved that much, this is no idle metaphor. This is the reality of the

salvation achieved at awful cost by Jesus: God coming to find us, plumbing the depths for us, taking the weight and the strain for us, living our life and dying our death for us, forgiving us and reconciling us; giving us “new birth into a living hope”. This is the intimacy of an eternal relationship of belonging and knowing, of acceptance, which not even death can end. Hallelujah!

The great hope of the arrival of the Lord’s Messiah, the birth of their first-born, as far as Mary and Joseph are concerned is amazing enough; but for them there is something else to face: a sword will pierce Mary’s heart ‘too’ – Jesus will suffer, and Jesus’ mother will watch; will stand at the foot of the cross and see just how costly it is for God’s promise of salvation put be put into action. The hope planted in us carries a cost, that is what Simeon wanted Mary to understand. Being the Messiah is costly, bearing the Messiah is costly, receiving the Messiah is costly, following the Messiah is costly. Now as then. The light shines in the darkness, the light of God’s creative truth made flesh, the light we are called to see by and to reflect; and the darkness has not overcome it. But the darkness is there. Still there. For now.

The strange thing is that those who mock faith often see it as a comfort blanket for those who are too immature to live as adults without a divine “Abba” to comfort and protect them. True faith is more realistic. Bonhoeffer, I think it was, who said, “When Jesus calls someone he bids them ‘Come and die’.” Take up your cross and come with me, whatever your cross may be. But still there is hope! We do this because of the divine hope planted in our hearts. Resurrection hope. New heaven and new earth hope. Goodness and love hope.

So we set out into a new year, glad of what we have learned this year and of how we have been blessed by other peoples’ sacrifices; ready for the new thing of a post Brexit, post Covid world which will gradually emerge, and the cost which will have to be paid; and ready to attune ourselves to whatever the Spirit may say to us, ask of us, promise us. Living patiently we will tend the garden, planting seeds of what is right: of mutual acceptance, of forgiveness, of justice, of compassion and generosity; seeds that God will grow into active goodness enabling people’s recognition of the ineffable. This is the core of whatever else we are doing, our calling. Like Simeon and Anna may we be found faithful to the end , knowing that whatever happens, whatever happens, the light of God cannot be extinguished.