

Hope

Introduction to the Readings

At Pentecost we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and throughout the Pentecost Season – otherwise called “ordinary season” we deliberately listen to the Spirit to explore ways to respond to God's call in our time and place. We reflected on what it means to be the church active today, living out God's hope in our world. This culminated in the feast of the Reign of Christ, a relatively late addition to the liturgical calendar and a response to the growing fascism evident in the years leading up to the Second World War.

We might expect the first week of Advent – the week with the theme of hope – might be a joyful celebration of God's hope for this world. Instead we hear cries of desperation. Third Isaiah writes to a community who, having been painted an idyllic image of returning to Jerusalem, are now faced with the reality that reconstruction poses. Far from being a joyful return, there is hard work in rebuilding the city, its institutions, and relationships. Mark's Gospel was written to a community that probably lived in Syria during the time of the First Jewish Revolt. Refugees fleeing the revolt would be coming into the community, with their experiences of trauma and tales of the destruction of the land of Israel. Finally, in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to a community in conflict, trying to call them back to being the church as they struggle between their faith and the expectations of an upwardly mobile society.

On one level, all of these readings remind us of the limitations of humanity to make the world a better place. Why are they read on this first Sunday in Advent? To remind us that no matter how much we are called to enact God's hope in our world, we still need to look towards God for the renewal of the world.

Readings

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

Reflecting on the Readings

At the start of 2020 I was teaching a unit of Church History, which was targeted at people who for a range of reasons had not learnt European history. We had wound our way through multiple plagues, wars, theological conflicts, and monumental changes in society. Whether the events were specific to the church, or encompassing all of society, we then explored what it meant for how theology developed in response. By the end of the term we were in lockdown, sitting in our separate homes and learning via the wonders of technology when one of my students said “Before I did this unit, I would have thought that an event like COVID was a sign of the end of the world. Now I know it's something that periodically happens.”

As humans, we like to be in control... or at least think we are. It is disconcerting to acknowledge that some things just happen – there HAS to be a reason! After the first glorious days of returning from Exile, and at a time when the harsh reality of rebuilding kicks in, how do we sustain hope? Where is God for us at this time? Over the last few years through bushfires and floods, we have seen communities across Australia dealing with the same questions in a contemporary way: how to rebuild the community after such devastation? Is there something we need to do differently

to prevent it happening again? I can see the point of the people asking these questions. It is not just to gain certainty and control; why rebuild if it is going to be destroyed sometime in the future?

Similarly the community that first heard Mark's Gospel were in the process of watching the slow destruction of Israel. As part of that meaning making, there would have been people who claimed it was the end of the world or even that they were the returning Messiah. We see these ideas springing up periodically with people claiming they had calculated the end of the world and it would occur on a particular date.

These "end of the world" claims are not simply annoying because of the stereotypes they generate about Christians. They are also downright dangerous. There is a streak in fundamentalist Christianity that says we don't need to worry about climate change because God is going to come along and burn it all anyway. On one level, we are still faced with the same issues that Mark's community faced.

Today's reading sits at an interesting junction. Mark chapters 1-12 outline the stories of what Jesus said and taught. From chapter 14 onwards we read the Easter story. Throughout chapter 13, which incidentally is read at the start and end of this liturgical year, we hear some of the main themes summed up along with echoes of what is about to happen. If we read on through the Passion narrative, we would hear of the darkness covering the land and the curtain of the temple being torn – events foreshadowed in today's reading.

But what of the watchfulness? On one level we see parallels as the disciples fall asleep while Jesus prays in the garden. Only a few weeks back we had Matthew's take on this teaching where people were busily going about their ordinary lives only to have this interrupted by the Messiah's return. Rather than advocating for withdrawal from life Matthew's interpretation is about awareness within our ordinary lives.

So, in reflecting on hope in relation to today's readings, we encounter a new question and a new invitation to relationship with God. We see hope, and these "end times" passages as not being about withdrawal from the world or God's miraculous intervention to fix everything. Rather it is about living out hope in active partnership with God. Over the course of history we have seen both of the extremes. We have seen societies that thought they were creating a world according to God's laws – and the result inevitably is a controlling and abusive society that fails to recognise different situations and nuances in personal experiences. We have also seen the danger of simply giving up and waiting for divine intervention, which leads to the sort of religion that Marx labelled the "opiate of the masses."

Instead, we are called to an active hope. This is the hope that acknowledges the painful reality of life, while looking towards God's possibilities. It is a hope that listens to God's call to engage in the world; a hope that neither seeks to optimistically replace God nor does it fatalistically leave all the changes in divine hands.

Take some time this week to reflect on where you sit on this spectrum of hope from optimism to fatalism. Explore the strengths and weaknesses of the different ends of this continuum – how can we, as a church, find that central position of working alongside God to bring hope to our world?