



## HOPE

**Sunday 7 November 2021**

*SERMON TRANSCRIPT*

Beginning today, and right up to Christmas, we are celebrating Advent. Advent means 'arrival' and it is a time where we reflect on the arrival of Jesus, both in His incarnation and in His future arrival as the enthroned King Jesus. Advent became a thing from about the 4th Century and the weeks up to Christmas Day were marked as a time of preparation and anticipation for His arrival. And not just His birth, but for what it means on the other side of that: anticipation of the following season which, in the northern hemisphere, meant the end of the shortest and darkest and coldest days of the year and the beginning of longer warmer days. So we are starting this season a little early and we will read from the prophet Isaiah and fix our thoughts on the themes of hope, peace, joy and love - words that sound all nice and fluffy, but I want to talk about how Jesus gives these words a distinctive meaning and how we can distinctively carry them out into our families, neighbourhoods and workplaces this Christmas.

Today, I begin with 'hope'. It's wired into us to anticipate that things will be better. Nine-out-of-ten of all the stories we tell and the movies we watch have a 'high school musical' kind of an ending - all the main characters are a happy, smiling, singing and dancing, or are justified, or are winners... We love it!

So 'hope' is something we can all possess - but how hopeful do we feel today? Maybe at a personal level you are super hopeful; maybe not. At a societal level, the answer to that is, generally, less hopeful for our lives, our nation and our planet than we were even 20 years ago. All the early series of Star Trek from the last century used to be highly utopian - that in the future humanity will have embodied the script of John Lennon's song, 'Imagine'. But all the more recent series of Star Trek series are way more dystopian - that a thousand years from now the future is a violent, conflicted, uncertain place where life doesn't advance but

constantly descends into chaos. Our art is less hopeful.

Let me descend further into the gloom for a minute (and I promise we won't stay here). I read two articles this week that I hope aren't prophetic. The first was by a world economic think tank which looked at the top 10 high probability risks we may face in 2022. It included:

- a China property crash could spark another GFC,
- a US stock market crash,
- that corona virus mutates as the vaccinations lose their potency,
- that cyber war breaks out,
- the tension between China and Taiwan sparking military conflict,
- another catastrophic year for the environment...

All very uplifting!

The other one was about the growing tension with China and the threat of military escalation and likely conflict later this decade that will draw in the superpowers. The author said we will look back and call this the terrible 20's.

How are you feeling now?! Whatever adaptations we are having to learn in the past two years may, if nothing else, be our new normal for a while. And, like I said, I hope they are all wrong.

The modernist view was that the smarter we get the better life will be - but that's not borne out in history nor in the wellbeing and happiness of people today. It seems the opposite: that the smarter we are and the better the tech, there is as much if not more suffering and inequality and depression across the world. Why is that? Perhaps because you can be really smart yet be just as broken. We are all corrupted by the power of 'self'. Our moral compasses can spin out of control and you can stamp out evil in one place and it will just take on a new form elsewhere. And if you want to take a strictly secular view of life where there is no god or transcendent or afterlife, then the final word on all this mess is not justice or redemption, but silence. The sun will burn out, the universe will collapse in, and it will be as though none of this ever happened. Of course, you can still know how to be hopeful - but ultimately, without God, there is nothing to hope in.

Well, isn't that all doom and gloom! Welcome back to church. But I said all that because it's the reality we live in, and the world Isaiah lived in, and we have to move from doom and gloom to deliverance and hope. Let's see how we can get there...

If you didn't know, Isaiah was a full-time prophet in Jerusalem and he lived in a period of Israel's history that really was quite terrible. His career began around 740BC in Jerusalem and at that time Israel was a basket case and the nations were circling just over the

horizon: an ascending people-group power who lived in the region of Syria, Turkey, and Iran – the Assyrians.

There had been a steady succession of bad kings who plunged the nation of Israel into the idolatry of the surrounding nations; and in the middle of Isaiah's ministry in 722BC the Assyrians sweep in and make Judah a vassal state. But years before that happened, Isaiah saw it coming, he saw the writing on the wall, like all the speakers at the climate summit in Glasgow. And Isaiah's message was basically a message of both doom and deliverance on repeat.

In Isaiah chapter 6, he gets his commissioning from God in a life changing encounter. And he goes straight to work in chapter 7 when Isaiah confronted the not-so-great King Ahaz to warn that Assyria is going to cut down the already crumbling nation. Doom. But he also offers hope that though Assyria will prevail, God will ultimately deliver them; and Isaiah speaks the most remarkable words: *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* (Isaiah 7:14) Doom and deliverance.

Then in chapter 8 there is another child, and (I can't help but love this one) Isaiah, it says, made love to his wife and the Lord tells him to name the child 'Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz' – which I still just reckon is one of the best names! You know all the Christian kids get named Joshua, Peter, Aaron, Paul, Naomi, Rachael or Simon, but I'm yet to hear someone call their kid this! The name 'Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz' means, "Speed to the spoil, hurry to the plunder." This spoke of the coming attack on Syria, Israel, and Judah by Assyria (that's what I call forward planning for a sermon illustration!) It'd be like naming your kid "Net-Zero-Or-Fry". Isaiah's son was to be a living illustration of doom and that destruction was coming as judgement on the nation for its idolatry and rebellion against God and their oppression of the poor.

Doom and gloom. But hope is never far away... Which brings us to our passage today – a message of 'hope':

*"Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan – The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will*

*be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this."* (Isaiah 9:1-7)

Handel totally stole those lyrics!

'Doom' is never the final word in a world where God is present. The final word is 'Deliverance and Hope': that a time will come when the people walking and living in a land of deep darkness will be flooded with glorious light; where joy replaces despair; and justice replaces oppression; and war will be a thing of the past. That all sounds like a John Lennon song... That sounds wonderful - but how, Isaiah?

And Isaiah gives remarkable clues as how God would fulfil His promises. We've already heard about a virgin, or young woman, giving birth to a child who is (of all things) Emmanuel, God with us! And here "*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...*" (Isaiah 9:6) But more, He will be a King. He will reign on David's throne and over His kingdom forevermore. And this future King is in David's line.

Isaiah gives some extremely exalted titles that I just wonder how anyone could have understood at the time: "Mighty God," "Eternal Father," and "Prince of Peace." When this King arrives, He will be the embodiment of the power and presence of the God of Israel, and He will bring about the fulfilment of God's promise to David. But more than that, He will be divine: God with us.

This kind of prophesy is not just hope as in a 'hopeful mood' or 'the power of positive thinking', but hope in the arrival of a person into history who would be like no king ever was or will be again. This King will be doing something greater than rescuing Israel from a fate they have invited. His arrival will bring about a renewal of creation itself.

Did you know that that there were at least 21 copies of Isaiah among the scrolls when the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in a cave in 1942? And they pre-dated Jesus and revealed with incredible accuracy to the exact text we have today! Isn't it wonderful that the words of Isaiah we are reading here today have been accurately preserved from a time long before Jesus - and yet, Jesus so perfectly fulfils them. Hope is not optimism or a mood. For Isaiah, and for the world, hope is a person with the power to take all the agony of human history and bring it into healing and rebirth.

So what is this hope that is at the heart of the gospel? Hope is a person in whom you can trust. If death is the ultimate stealer of hope, then the only true restorer of hope is found in the One who defeats it, who takes away its sting.

There is no formula to go from despair to hope. It's not like you either have hope or despair. You have hope amid despair. And hope is not making all the problems go away. In fact the problems don't disappear, but Jesus replaces the devastation of our heartaches with a comforting awareness of God being with us and a confident belief that this is not all pointless: justice will be established, judgement will happen, because what we do matters. And all wrongs will be redressed. That in the end, Jesus will make all things right - or as Sam says to Gandalf, "will everything sad become untrue."

In our world there is much doom and gloom, and so where does our hope come from? From a belief that we can solve the problems? That we can right our moral compass? That we will usher in a utopian future? By all means there are things we can and must do because we are stewards of all that God has entrusted to us. But real hope - hope that carries you through the worst of life - has to be located beyond you, in someone truly faithful, truly good, and truly able to deliver us from all evil: Jesus.

Isaiah would say in one of the most magnificent pieces of writing in all Scripture in Isaiah 40:31: *"Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."*

Where is your hope located? Hope in the Lord - which is more than just a happy prediction or dismissive optimism - is a practice, a voluntary action, a mindset; you invest now into the future you are waiting to fully see. It's living as though we are part of what God is completing: in your vision for your life, in your using the gifts and resources He has given you, in your mind sets, in your language. In simple ways, you can be an agent not of hopefulness, but of the One who you hope in.

I'd say hopefulness is not something I'm overflowing with. *"Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall."* But then I step back, realise that my hope is not in things going just right, not in something better of my own doing... My hope is in the Lord, in Jesus, born into this world as one of us for all of us. He is faithful to His promises and will come again, to make all things right: *"but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."* (Isaiah 40:31)