

Prayer: God, Emmanuel come to us – again. Step into our lives surprise and challenge us, but come! Do not hide your face from our sin but work in us as individuals and collectively that we might be re-moulded to fit better to serve you and transform our world. Come, Lord, come. Amen.

The End – *again*??? The end of all things of the faith for Christians, because Jesus died on the cross. At least that's what the world, or all who would deny the life God sought in creation would claim. **It is not our claim**, remember this one from last week? It is not the end – we have hope! We have promises! We have Jesus: 'God with us' then – and we wait for Christ to come again – and while we wait, our faith **propels** us to finding meaning.

I think this is another difference for those of faith – the meaning humanity hungers for and seeks **for us** is bound up in the life, the times and teachings of Jesus as God's Son – *whose birth in our flesh* we celebrate at Christmas. Our waiting for 'Christmas', has at least two levels: we wait for Christmas – *this year* **and** we wait for Christ to come again. It is this second waiting that we are challenged to think about today and our two texts offer some wisdom, provide some meaning while we wait hopefully!

I don't know about you – but I always have a little tension when we start talking about 'hope'! Like we saw / heard in our Advent video –hope has such individual needs wrapped up in it – and **to hope** is to be **so vulnerable**. How do we hold on to hope – when our hopes have been dashed or just crumbled in front of us? Both our texts offer help – Isaiah and his people were facing one set of life conditions in which 'hope' was a scarce commodity, while Paul was writing to the church in Corinth in the middle of persecution, internal disputes and theological expectations of Jesus coming back daily – almost as if to rescue them from the hardships of life!

So what does Isaiah and his people have to offer us that will help us to wait hopefully? – The section we heard from today comes from what is called 'Third Isaiah'. Our section is actually part of a lament!^{1*} The pain and sorrow, the **need** to understand in faith and **find meaning** tumble over themselves in the words. It is part of the ancient's story of what happened to them when they returned from exile in Babylon.

They had to start home from modern Iraq. They **started out with high hopes**, they were going home! I would imagine that most of us can identify in our lives times when we have tested the 'hope of returning home'?? So to help us realise that this is ancient 'stuff' is real, this is what is left of the ancient city of Babylon. There is a large Tell with broken mud buildings and this view is *from* what was Saddam Hussein's summer place. So they would have started 'home' from about 85 km south of modern Bagdad. This map may help us realise their return 'home', some 1200 kms was a 'good walk'!

^{1*} However, the high hopes of their return were never fully realised. There was the difficulty of the long journey; the challenges of rebuilding homes and lives; opposition from other groups, both Israelite and foreign. And all of this was under the oversight of the imperial rule of the Persians. There may even have been other hardships such as drought with which to cope (cf. Hag 1:5-6). So our reading today which is part of a **lament from the time of return**, reminds us that our most treasured hopes, those founded even upon the word of God, can be reshaped in the very process of fulfilment, and this even happens beyond the failure of any false expectations we might attach to genuine hopes.

A key understanding for us is that hope, in God's people can be re-shaped by God because of real life happenings. Hope in God's people is not necessarily crushed or destroyed when not realised – but for God's people when we open ourselves in faith and trust it is re-shaped, re-moulded, re-fitted to enable us to keep going. **If** having hope makes us vulnerable, then trusting the Lord in the middle of turmoil and life's upsets also makes us vulnerable, and although it's difficult for most of us to accept, for God to show his power and mercy and grace and love, we **have to allow** ourselves to be as soft as clay, allow ourselves to be easy to shape by divine hands into people beautiful for God and useful God's work in the world.

And God's work in the world, redefined by Jesus, is what we do while waiting. Especially as I don't agree with the theology of Christ's 2nd coming as a divine rescue mission. So providing the believer with an excuse not to follow Jesus teachings; that because Christ is coming, believer's behaviours / attitudes / exercising of faith / giving a cup of water to the thirsty and all those teachings from Jesus, don't have to happen, because Christ is coming, **rescuing us** from obeying and exercising our given gifts.

Christ **is** coming again – but we don't know when and have to trust because **only God** knows the hour and the day. **There is nothing** we can do about it – except work now – **do** the work of God in Jesus now. **To do that** Paul's gift to us today is from his letter to the people of the city of Corinth. They were struggling to establish a theology of Christ 2nd coming – ie that they couldn't sit around "waiting" – but had to get on with living – and to do that Paul assures them they have all they need.

In this beautiful passage Paul begins his assurance with a ^{2*} **theology of grace** that is embedded in the foundation of his teaching. Vs 3. "Grace and peace..." While this is the usual way to open a letter for his time – it provides his letter's base for a discussion about the gifts of God for the work of Jesus in the world. In this letter it is God's grace which defines the way God engages with people and the effects which it produces. Paul highlights the way the Corinthians responded to the Gospel message of Jesus he brought and shared with them. They can share their faith, they are maturing in faith to the point where Paul assured them– **they have all they need** to work, while they wait and hope for Christ to come again.

But they don't have anything in their own strength or abilities alone – they have what they need because of Christ and when he comes again all will be perfected. Until that day, it is God on who we are to rely because it is God who makes a faith community one in Christ – a Christian community! Paul writes that it begins with God through (Paul) – the human co-worker and it ends with God.

The human co-workers with God have been – are very blessed – they /we have been **given all we need** both material and spiritual, and for this Paul gives thanks. As all are gracious gifts, there ought to not be any place for divisions and hierarchy among them. All in the community; men, women, slave and free, rich and poor, new believers and old believers – are called into the community of Jesus. And this is a distinguishing feature of 'Jesus' community from those outside, the fellowship that is shared among the members across social differences, another gift for which Paul gives thanks.

If we read on in this letter we will see that Paul notes that all of these gifts will pass away. **What remains**, and is most needful, **is love**. In our short slice of the letter, Paul places his confidence in God who, in Jesus, will strengthen them so that, in the end, they may be found blameless. Paul is confident that this shall be so because God is faithful.

So for us today – starting our march towards celebrating Jesus birth, today's readings speak to us about our faith **and** the hope it gives us as a foundation for our daily living – our daily work for the Kingdom of Heaven as Jesus called it. ^{1*} "First, it is grounded only on the Lord's mercy and grace. Secondly, we are in constant need of being remoulded or reworked by the one who is our 'potter', whose work we are. Thirdly, our hope even if solidly founded and worked out on God's word, is never ours to claim and hold against the Lord. The Lord we follow, upon whom we call, and whom we await, **is always** the one who does deeds 'we do not expect' (v. 3), and this Lord is faithful.

^{3*} **But**, whether we speak of a vision of God's kingdom in the middle of the turmoil of the past, or a vision of God's reign coming in the middle of the turmoil of the future, the essential message remains the same – **God is always coming to us**, and the world's turmoil **does not stop us** from knowing and experiencing God's reign right here and now. **It is the hope** we have that God is at work in our world that gives us the security, the grace and the strength to live faithfully as followers of Christ and to make our contributions to the world's transformation – and it is this hope that Advent Sunday offers us. Amen