

SERMON ADVENT HOPE – The Prophets candle

There's a well-known saying about hope that I first heard as a young child. Because of his childhood circumstances, my dad had little education, so consequently spent most of his life working in factories. These were the days with some pretty dodgy work practises towards factory workers.

We've all probably been in working situations where if you want to keep your job, you best keep quiet. Dad's problem was that he never could. If he saw something unjust or unfair, he'd speak his mind and consequently would get the sack more than most.

I remember he'd come home looking sheepish and Mum would say... "you've got the sack again haven't you Len – why don't you just learn to keep quiet"

I remember on one occasion mum was quietly crying (because it meant a time of financial hardship) and I went over and said are you alright Mum"? And she said ... "I'm alright son, don't you worry. **There's always a light at the end of the tunnel.**"

Light is synonymous with the spirit of hope. Its why it's the dominant image of the season of Advent. It's why we light candles to begin each service.

I remember my daughter Myah spoke a few months back and she said that her favourite verse in the bible is from **John 1:5 ... The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.** I remember smiling when she said this, because it's one of my favourite scripture verses too. It captures the very essence of what it means to have hope.

That whatever circumstances or situations are happening **to us** - or **around us** in life: However dark and bleak things may seem... God's Truth, Beauty, Justice and Goodness as revealed in Christ, cannot be extinguished by the forces of darkness.

The darkness may diminish this divine Christ light, even at times appear to overwhelm it ... but the Christ light will always shine through. This is our Christian faith and hope. And this is our journey for the next 4 weeks.

**One way to nourish this spirit of hope,
is to learn to recognise it when we see it all around us.**

Which of these images expresses the spirit of hope for you?



Is it, simple acts of human kindness? When you see people loving their neighbour as themselves with acts of nobility, decency and self-sacrifice bringing light to the lives of others.



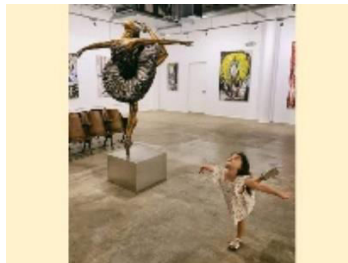
Is it when people come together from across their normal divides and differences to stand in solidarity against the forces of hatred and division? Nowhere has this hope been expressed and witnessed more, than in what we saw after Christchurch.



Is it when we witness beautiful moments like this? A testimony to human resilience to overcome obstacles and show that whatever society might consider a disability, the human spirit can shine through and bring value.



Is it the sheer magnificence of nature and God's creation that breathes hope and life into you, when spirits are low?



Or this? A beautiful image that captures the spirit of children and how they want to emulate and aspire to so that they can achieve and become?



Or is it this powerful image? The hope that one day, we will put down the spears and swords of death, destruction and darkness, and finally learn, that if humanity wants to walk in the ways of God's light, then it can only be achieved when we learn to live with one another in peace.



And of course, central to our faith is the Cross. The ultimate act of LOVE by Christ, to break the back of darkness and shine the light of hope for all creation.

In all 3 scripture passages today, we see this image of light and hope.



- The Greatest O/T prophet of them all Isaiah, with a vision of global transformation. A time when everyone will **“walk in the light of the Lord”**
- In the letter to the Romans, St Paul, saying **“let us put on the armour of light”**
- And then Jesus making one of His 7 extraordinary ‘I AM’ proclamations by declaring **“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”**

There's a great description of Isaiah that I love... He's sometimes known as the **‘poet of light’** because even when he was criticising the Jewish people for going absent on their call to be ‘a light to all nations’ ... he was still offering powerful images and poetic visions of light and life.

In verse 2 he paints this picture of hope.

The mountain of the LORD's temple (and by temple he doesn't mean a building he's talking the whole earth) **will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.**

This is Isaiah giving us a poetic vision for a new humanity. He's asking God's people to imagine a world where people of all nations come to the mountain of God and join together, as ONE. A vision of the kingdom come here on earth.

Now remember these words were given at a time when people were deeply tribal - deeply divided – deeply war-like. This would have been a stunning vision of a new heaven and a new earth almost impossible for them to imagine.

Imagine a world says Isaiah ... where people **'will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.'**

Can you and I Imagine a world, where people turn their weapons of death, destruction and darkness ... into instruments that bring life.

This is a vision of hope from Isaiah, that akes on an even more compelling urgency for us today. **Because our spears and swords now look like this...**



Weapons of destruction that have the frightening capacity to consume today's world into a scenario of darkness, that Isaiah could never of imagined possible. And yet, these are words of hope from Isaiah, still have the capacity to inspire people's imaginations today. They stir our deep yearnings and aching's for a better world. It's why it's a classic Advent scripture passage and captures this sense of hope.



**Advent is a chance to imagine the world not as it is,
but as it should be.**

Last night we did the Spirituality of Music evening and we sang John Lennon's ***Imagine*** and I couldn't help but see the spirit of Isaiah in the words of Lennon's song.

As I said a few weeks back.

Is this why this song still lives on 50 years after it was birthed and why it still touches hearts and lives across the globe, transcending the barriers of age, race, culture and creed.

Because it speaks into this deep human desire and yearning for a better way.

It sings of a world not as it is... but as it could and should be.

Imagine all the people living lives in peace. "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will live as one.

A time when humanity, will walk in the way of the light.

On a personal level. I don't think you can prepare a sermon for the first week of Advent, and NOT begin to think even more deeply about the bigger questions of human existence. To do what St Paul urges us to do.



“to wake from our sleep”. To think about a world where we **“lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of Christ’s light”**.

It's why Advent (and Lent) have been such a core-traditions down the centuries. Because they give us the opportunity to reflect and go deeper.

As I thought deeply about the power of light to bring hope. I asked the core question.

What does this Light of Christ look like, in our lives and in the world around us?

For me personally, I've arrived at a place where I have an unshakeable conviction in a core truth of our faith and a core truth of life.

The more I read scripture – The more I immerse myself in the life of Jesus - And the more I experience and hopefully learn from LIFE ... The more I keep arriving at the same core conclusion.

That there are 3 things that last into eternity... Faith, Hope and Love. And the greatest of these is Love. Love of God Love of Neighbour.



The supreme truth of the Christian faith is the power of love. And by LOVE... I mean the kind of love that Jesus Christ preached, lived and was prepared to die for.

The BEST DEFINITION in a sentence that I've come across to capture this kind of Christ like love is this...

It's about wanting nothing but the highest good for the other person.

Whether the other person, be our they our family, friends, neighbours, a stranger, or even our enemy. Christ calls us to want nothing but their highest good. As Christ did for humanity. A servant hearted, self-giving love. **“Whoever follows me in this kind of love, cannot walk in darkness”** said Jesus.

So the way, we lay aside the works of darkness and walk in the light ... is by growing and living, in the way and truth of what it means to LOVE.

WITHOUT THE WAY OF LOVE, THERE CAN BE NO LIGHT AND THERE CAN BE NO HOPE

This is the kind of love, that the resurrection of Christ validated and vindicated.

So that we, empowered by the Spirit, can now live this way of love. Every path and road I've ever walked down, has led me to this same truth.

WHY DOES THIS CHRIST-LOVE SHINE THE LIGHT THAT BRINGS HOPE?

Well just imagine a world, where every decision and policy, be it government, banking, medical, educational, housing or environmental policy, was created and passed with the sole intention of serving the highest good of every human being.

- **How much light would penetrate the darkness?**
- **How much hope would permeate people's hearts and lives?**
- **How much more would the kingdom come here on earth.**

But I still have a few conversations with fellow Christians who say to me... AAHH but Josh, it's not just about love". To which I now respectfully say, "I'm sorry but it is". And this know because the bible tells me so.

I read the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus words on the final judgement ... and it's pretty clear to me – that those who incur the anger and judgement of Christ - are those who failed to love as Christ loves.

I also have the witness of my own experience.

I have yet to meet anyone, who has been healed, restored SAVED and made whole by the power of wrath, judgement and condemnation. In fact, it's the complete opposite. Everyone I've met who carries damage and trauma, is a victim in some way of being made to feel unworthy through shame and condemnation.

Equally, everyone I've ever met who HAS been healed, restored saved and made whole again (and in process given a new hope) ... is healed and restored through the power of love. **Including my own life.**

I always remember someone who'd been through a time of real pain and struggle coming here to St George's and saying to me a few years later. Josh, this community has LOVED me back to LIFE." And given me hope. **The light of Christian love has given her hope.**

Gareth gave us that incredible story last week of Peerom who after years of cruelty and exclusion was given the light of hope. HOW? Because he witnessed the love being shared by Christians and this switched on a light of hope for him.



So as we begin the Advent season.

**What might it look like for you to be a witness to this light of love to others?
How might we nurture our own sense of hope in dark situations.**

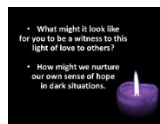
For me one of the practical ways I do this to recognise that this Christ-like love that brings light and hope, is all around us. We can often make the mistake of only seeing it when it comes in big and dramatic ways. But if we open our eyes and ‘stay awake’, as St Paul said, the Spirit of Christ is always at work.

And I'll conclude with a story of how we witnessed this last Sunday at the 7pm evening service.

The team at 7pm invited the Auckland Street Choir to come and perform but just a bit of context about them before we watch it.

In their own words, they are community choir for those who **are, were, or support**, the homeless rough sleepers. It's place where the marginalised, disenfranchised, downtrodden, destitute and scruffy can come to a safe supportive environment to learn and sing songs. They meet in the basement of Pitt St Methodist Church, every Tuesdays for singing, laughter food and a community they can belong to. Which sounds a lot like the Kingdom Banquet that Jesus said God invited people to.

PLAY VIDEO OF THEM SINGING



Notice the songs they're singing. "Reach out and I'll be there, with a love that will see you through." "I'll be there to love and comfort you". "Don't look back in anger" And "Hallelujah" Singing songs of love and hope.

The music was a joy and a real privilege to be there, but it was also their stories of finding hope that was deeply moving. One lady told of huge struggles with her health and living with constant pain. She told of a time in hospital when she was in unbearable pain, but the choir sent her a picture of them at practise, and this did what the painkillers had failed to do. T took away her pain.

She said this community and their voices are my painkillers.

What helped this lady and the others find their healing and hope?

It was the power of love.

I was talking to Joice Grantham after to thank her for book them. And she said that they are often wary about singing to churches because churches are often more concerned with trying to convert them, than simply welcoming them.

But a few days later she got this email from a lady called Cara.

I want to thank you and the people of St George's personally for the wonderful aroha (love) and hospitality shown to us, right down to the flowers on the table, honestly that was an amazing gesture to have for the team of us that we (the choir) support I was very touched by everything throughout the evening from the welcome extended and especially the generous gift of the grocery cards. I was overwhelmed. And so many of your colleagues and there were in our group of what I understand to be 50 Thank you, thank you, for a wonderful evening but more than that, there was the love of God as evident in the planning.

Such an example of what I understand to be love, love, love from Cara, 2024.

“Dear Jocelyn, I want to thank you and the people of St George's personally for the wonderful aroha (love) and hospitality shown to us, right down to the flowers on the

tables, beautiful tea-cups and matching saucers to serve the tea! The food was so nice and the dessert superb! I was very touched by everything throughout the evening from the welcome extended and especially the generous gift of the grocery cards.

I was gobsmacked. And so were my dear colleagues on either side of me. This will definitely impact people out there and in our group of what true Christianity really is! Thank you, thank you, for a wonderful evening but more than that, there was the **love of God so evident** in the planning.

Such an example of what true Christianity is like! Love, love, love from Cara. Xxxx

Notice the word she used to describe how they felt they had been welcomed and the word she uses to show appreciation. ***Thank you for the wonderful Aroha (the love) that welcomed us - The Love of God was so evident in the planning.***

And then her appreciation ... ***Love, love, love from Cara. Xxxx***

And what's the fruit of this love?

People were impacted by the evening. For them this is what true Christianity looks like. The Light of Christ shining through the encounter. Shining into people's lives and in the process bringing a Spirit of hope. AMEN