

An Address by Belinda Speed Andrews for Sunday 12th July 2020

‘The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

I’m sure there are many of you listening today who have climbed one, if not all the 3 major peaks in the British Isles and possibly many more besides. I had the joy a number of years ago, to climb Snowdon, Scafell and Ben Nevis over a 12 month period. As much as I love the gentleness of the hills in Devon and the coastline and the ruggedness of the moors it will always be for me the hills in Cumbria and Scotland that hold a very special place in my heart. Coming off at Junction 36 on the M6, and as I begin to see the mountains that begin to appear in front of me, my heart leaps. I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s the majesty and grandeur that engulfs one or just the sheer mystery that is the heart of these two places, but when I see them again it is as if my heart bursts into song & and I can imagine as I read the passage from Isaiah this morning these two places I love so much and the trees of the fields clapping their hands.

It is a real shame that the lectionary begins the reading at verse 10 and not from the beginning of the chapter as this chapter of Isaiah is one of the most beautiful and hope-filled chapters of this book in the Old Testament - it is literally a chapter of hope. From a preacher’s point of view though I am really glad I am only dealing with 4 verses this morning!!

For many people across our nation, this pandemic has been an incredibly difficult time. There have been people left at home wondering if they will ever see their loved ones again as they are wheeled into the local ICU suffering with the horrendous effects of Covid-19.

There are people across our nation on furlough still, especially in the hospitality and tourism industry wondering whether they will ever return to the job they had at the beginning of the lockdown. And there are small and medium business owners who are not sure whether their business will survive the economic fallout from Covid. And the Church has not come away unscathed either.

For all these people, the carpet has been pulled out from under their feet and their worlds are in great danger of shattering into small fragile pieces if this hasn’t happened already. So, to be honest and understandably so, this reading from Isaiah is far removed from these people’s psyche.

Therefore you may wonder why I am preaching on this passage today. For me, if there is one thing I would like to take away from my experience of this pandemic, it is that God is a God of abundance, of unfathomable mercy and above all a God of hope: hope in a future that is bigger than the past; ‘Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do because I am going to the Father’. (John 14: 12)

It was Pentecost Sunday all but a few weeks ago, a time when the church waits expectantly for the Holy Spirit to fill us again; a time of great joy and celebration, a time of hope, of bigger and better things to come; a time to re-energise & re-centre our focus on all that Jesus has taught us. But how easy it is, as we move through ‘Ordinary time’, the name itself suggests boredom, that we can lose our passion, our excitement, our thoughts, our hope of living God’s kingdom now. And yet this morning’s reading from Isaiah bursts in with this joyful melody, an uplifting song of hope in a time that has been, for several months, desperate, sad, frustrating for many, many people.

Now, some weeks after Pentecost, to think about and imagine new possibilities feels somewhat beyond our capabilities and a challenge for the church. And yet God clearly says to the Israelites, through Isaiah, ‘For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I purpose’.

God promises never to leave us unequipped for the tasks for which he has called each of us to; even if we fail it is not beyond God to turn it to success. We have seen this time and time again throughout the Bible.

The reading from Isaiah this morning is written at a time when the Israelites are in exile in Babylon and it is from here that God gives this message of hope. The Israelites have lost everything, their home, their land, their Temple and their King. It couldn’t get any worse than this; this is a time of maximum deficit. Yet in Babylon the Israelites see a face of God they’ve never seen before, one that they weren’t even looking for. Here was a God who suffered with them, who met them far from home, far from the promised land. They looked back at the time in Egypt and realised that God was with them; it was God who brought them out from slavery and travelled

with them into the promised land. Now here in Babylon they experience a covenant relationship of companionship where both they and God suffer, and they begin to see their God in a transformative way. Is this perhaps what we have seen in our nation in the last few months? God has shown up in the ICU, in our communities and in our neighbourhoods, in our supermarkets, across the nation in acts of kindness and generosity. God has walked this awful walk with us in solidarity, in his love for us; in his desire to be with us always in all situations.

This hope that Isaiah talks about is not some fantasy, something imagined. It is real, very real and Isaiah points us toward this hope in his words to us this morning. It is grounded in the rhythmic nature of creation. God's ways maybe higher than our ways, his thoughts higher than our thoughts, but things on high come down to earth, as rain and snow come down to nourish the earth and feed us. God is not a God who created the world and all that is in it and then sat back with his feet up to watch what happened next. God comes to us and he promises that his creative acts will 'not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose & succeed in the thing for which I sent it'.

Our challenge is we have been in exile now for four months and this is going to continue for some time yet. We may never go back to the way we were. So how in this situation, this time of exile, do we encourage people to hang on to hope? How do we inspire hope in those who are broken-hearted, down-trodden, forgotten and neglected or just down-right broken at the moment?

As lockdown begins to ease, as infection rates decline and death rates are now below 100 every day. There is light at the end of the tunnel even if it is just a chink of light. We are coming home. We are coming back, but life will never be the same again for many of us, maybe for none of us. We are not who we were 4 months ago and we cannot I suggest, be squeezed back into our former shape.

Hope, in part for us, is for the first time in many weeks, being allowed to gather under one roof to worship God, to give thanks for his abundant blessings and to be strengthened by the gift that each is to the other. Our hope is not ethereal. Our hope is grounded in the witness of creation and it's beauty that surrounds us. It is in all that we have witnessed in the kindness & compassion of humanity, in the devotion by those whose job it has been to care for the sick and dying. It is grounded in each of us gathered today as we return time and time again to be with God. Let us find together as a community called by God that place where our hearts sing and we can

imagine the trees of the field clapping their hands; a joy that is rooted in the very core of who we are, because we are, by grace called by the One who loves us.