

Brackenhurst Methodist Church 30 November 2008
Advent 1: The Hope for the Coming of the Messiah

Call to Worship: Psalm 25:1-5

To you, O Yahweh, I lift up my soul;
in you I trust, O my God.
Do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
No one whose hope is in you
will ever be put to shame,
but they will be put to shame
who are treacherous without excuse.

Show me your ways, O Yahweh,
teach me your paths;
guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, give us grace to turn from the works of darkness, and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which you came to dwell with us in in great humility in the human experience of Jesus Christ; that in the last day when you come again in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead we may experience the fullness of your kingdom; through the one who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever.

Amen

- Hymn 81 — Come thou Long-expected Jesus

ADVENT CANDLE

Welcome & Notices

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

And so, most heavenly Lord, God, King, Creator of us all we come before you this morning celebrating in the vision that you have given to us

- A visions of a world that is perfect

A world that is law abiding, just and righteous

- and a world in which you light shines out to all

As we draw together to worship you this morning help us to hold that vision always before us, so that we too, may work to seek for justice and righteousness, and that our worship of you may be more than words or song, but a way of life

- Let us exalt you with our every action
- Let us glorify you with our every thought
- Let us honour you with every word

That your light may shine through us to the nation, that the nations may proclaim that you are Lord, indeed.

Yet as we seek your light we are aware that very often the brightness of that light reveals the darkness of our hearts

- The light reveals the darkness that chooses not to exalt you, not to glorify you, not to honour you
- the darkness that glorifies self instead

So as we worship you this morning we pray that we would hold before us not just a vision of a new world

- but also the vision of a new me
 - * A me in which the light has washed away all the darkness,
 - * a me which is filled with love
 - * A me which seeks justice and righteousness and hope for all

Even as you did, Lord Jesus Christ

We call ourselves Christians — help us to follow you

Help us to turn to your example and make that real in this world.

Through the strength and power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

- Hymn 47 — What shall I do my God to love

Offering and Prayer

Scripture:

Isaiah 51:4-11

Rom 13:8-14

Mt 25:31-46

- Hymn 267 — Love Divine

Message

INTRODUCTION

- One of the things that has been in the news so much over these last few months has been the financial crisis
 - As for various reason the US economy has fallen apart and the rest of the world has followed suit.
- Economists are talking about recession — lack of growth in the economy
 - And I think that people are fearful of what is going to happen: pensions, investments, debt and so on are all cause for concern
- And so times are pretty tough at the moment.
 - And it doesn't look as though they're going to get much easier in the short term, although we do have a drop in the petrol price on Wednesday to look forward to.
- I heard the other day about an architect, a surgeon, and economist discussing who's job was most important. The surgeon said, 'Look, we're the most important. God's a surgeon because the very first thing God did was to extract Eve from Adam's rib.'
 - The architect said, 'No, wait a minute, God is an architect. God made the world in seven days out of chaos.'
 - * The economist smiled, 'And who made the chaos?'
- But jokes aside it is a difficult time for many people
 - It's not just about the interest rate going up needing to cut back a bit somewhere else to be able to pay the bond,
 - * Things really are challenging for many of us
- The retailers are apparently going to have a bleak Christmas season (which is maybe not a bad thing)
 - And I was reading in the paper yesterday how the travel and tourism industry is struggling with people not going on holiday this year
- So times really are difficult, but this is nothing new
- Again and again in our history we have been confronted with events that shake us as humanity to our core.
 - I was thinking just the other day that we cannot complain about our circumstances yet, thinking of my great-grandparents who in their life times had to deal with the Anglo-Boer war, WWI, the great depression and WWII
- We read from Isaiah — when he was writing the Israelites, God's chosen people were going through a really difficult time
 - I'll speak more about that later
- Jesus, at the time that he lived, did not have an easy lifestyle

- The reality is that most people throughout history have struggled — very few people have had it as good as the middle class have in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 21st
- And so if today we look at our life, our country, our world and we're wondering how we're going to deal with the situation that we face today and, I guess, in the coming years
 - It seems good to me that we turn to scripture and see how people were able to live in hope and not fear or despondency
- and when we do that I think that we can start to see tough times as times of incredible opportunity, times of refreshing, times of growth
 - Yes there are practical things that can and need to do
 - * we may need to tighten our belts
 - * we may need to be creative in making ends meet
- But tough times for God's people have always been a time of purification
 - A time of remembering God's vision for the world once again
 - * And a time when the Church, when God's people, can step up to the plate and start to make a difference in the world
 - * A time when we can stop focussing so much on me, and start looking at how we can truly become God's community.
- Today is the first Sunday in Advent
 - The beginning of the church year
- And the first Sunday in Advent begins with a message of hope
 - Hope that things can be different, things can be better, a time of hope for our salvation and the one who brings it
 - * The one known as Messiah, the Christ
- And it is a time when we hold before us a picture of how things could / should be and are prepared to do something towards making that a reality
 - Many times this vision of a new reality is described as the Kingdom of God
 - * A kingdom, a place, a way of life in which what we truly long for in life is realised.
 - A place that the oft mentioned Christmas wish ("World Peace"), so often spoken by celebrities has come true
 - * and in which the law, justice and righteousness prevails.
- So what is the Kingdom that we hope for, and how can that help us to deal with difficult times?
 - It is a Kingdom that is:
 - * prophesied
 - * exemplified

* realised

(1) A Kingdom that is Prophesied

- So firstly, the Kingdom of God that we hope for, the kingdom that is ruled by the one we hope for and remember every year at Christmas,
 - Is a kingdom that is prophesied
- It is a kingdom that people begin to speak about and to hope for and to expect long before it arrived
 - It was a kingdom that was prophesied
- What does prophesy mean?
 - Very often we have this idea in mind that a prophesy is someone foretelling the future
 - * Someone with crystal ball who looks into it and can tell you what's going to happen in the stock market
- No, prophecy in the Bible, in the Old testament, especially by the great prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah is about forth-telling
 - It is about speaking the word of God (next week) into places and situations where things are not what they ought to be
 - * And demonstrating instead how things should be
- And very often calls people to make radical changes in their lives — and people don't like that which is why prophets are never very popular
 - This passage that we read from Isaiah was probably written towards the end of the Exile in Babylon
- The Jewish people were going through tough times — not only had they been in Exile for 70 years
 - But now they had to go back and rebuild their homeland.
 - * Give Zimbabwe another 50 years or so of disintegration and then tell all the descendants of Zimbabwe who have made their home is South Africa to back and rebuild
 - * This is what had happened.
- As they approach the task of rebuilding Isaiah says to them: this is the way it could be; this is the way it should be
 - You're not going to build a kingdom of materialism
 - * but rather a kingdom of love, of hope, of righteousness, of salvation — you're going to rebuild the holy land the way God intended it to be
- Here's a very radical thought
 - The difficult times we go through, especially at the moment are based on materialistic view of life

- * The idea that we are taught from childhood at school that we are a success if we can accumulate more possessions than the next guy
- I received a letter in the post the other day ILLUSTRATION
 - This is success
- And so when the financial system falls apart and we lose all our savings and investments our own lives fall apart!
 - If we had used as a measure of success something other than materialism it wouldn't be such a crisis
- I think that God would love us to understand this, you see, the kingdom which is prophesied, the kingdom over which the expected Messiah would reign is a kingdom that is not built on materialism
 - it is a kingdom of law, justice and righteousness.
 - This is what is prophesied, this is the kingdom which Jesus came to inaugurate
 - * where there are no hungry, thirsty, naked.
 - A kingdom where justice prevails in the sense that everybody has enough, there are no longer rich and poor.
 - A kingdom in which the law of love compels - not commands (that's communism) - but compels us to look after and care for one another.
- When times are tough we encouraged to turn once again to the picture God gives us of a world that is not built on materialism
 - but on justice
- This is the kingdom that is prophesied
 - And tough times gives us the opportunity to return to that vision

(2) A Kingdom that is Exemplified

- So when times are tough and we turn back to the words of the prophets we are reminded of how things ought to be
 - But secondly as people who are chosen by God and who have chosen to follow God
 - * we are the ones who ought to be demonstrating this alternative way (demonstrating the way things ought to be) of life to everybody else
- If anybody is going to stand up and set an example of how we ought to be living, demonstrating that this is possible, it should be the Christian — it should be the church.
- In Romans Paul tells us that we are not to let our financial debts remain outstanding
 - Now he is speaking about our responsibility to society and leadership

- But the one debt that can never be repaid and which we should always try our best to repay even though it can never be done
 - Is the debt to love one another
 - * We should continually be seeking ways to love wastefully
- Paul understands that when we speak of God's kingdom and when we desire to build the kingdom of hope that was prophesied by Isaiah and others although we are to use the tools of the world — money
 - He recognises that what is important is not the materialism but care for each other found by people who love abundantly, extravagantly, wastefully.
- Love, Paul tells us, is the fulfilment of the Law, and we find to be true the statement that when we love and live in love we find the law being obeyed; justice and righteousness are proclaimed. Paul tells us that these things are attained when we “behave decently” (Rom 13:13).
 - The prophesied kingdom of law, justice and righteousness is found when people love each other
- What is prophesied and hoped for by the people of God is exemplified by God's people who love
 - So as Christ followers we are the ones who should set the example
- Firstly in terms of how we behave with the material things God has given us
 - we better than anybody should understand that Jesus is not about materialism
 - * and our lives should not be built around the material
 - Isn't it funny that shopping is aimed at followers of Christ
 - * Imagine if Christians refused to buy at Christmas time!
- Secondly we need to remember that we are the ones who have have responsibility to speak out against systems that are unjust,
 - and to use the resources that we have to increase justice, to create equality
- Let me be clear
 - I'm to saying that we who have have to become poor — poverty does not glorify God
 - * Being poor does not make us any more holy
- But those of us who have more often than not have through an accident of birth
 - Yes, we've probably worked hard for it — but we've had the ability and drive and background to work hard
 - * College experience — my own luck in language, education, educated parents — and at home etc
 - those are enormous advantages — I have been blessed
- But with great blessing comes great responsibility

- we need to recognise that we have been gifted and using those gifts to bless each other
- When we live with love for others in our hearts we desire to use what we have been blessed with to reach out and help others become all that they can be
 - We exemplify the values of the Kingdom
 - * the values of the expected Messiah

(3) A Kingdom that is Realised

- And then finally, if we do those things
 - if we speak in a way that is prophetic, proclaiming the vision, the hope of a better way of life with our words
 - and if we live a lifestyle of love, proclaiming hope with our actions
 - * As Spong, one of the authors I enjoy reading says — if we live fully, love wastefully and have the courage to be all that we can be
- Then the kingdom of God starts to move from being pie in sky, from being something that we hope for to something that is more tangible
 - And maybe that is what Christmas is about
 - * Not presents, and gifts, and spending
 - But living in such a way that Emmanuel God with us is not about a baby born in a stable 2000 years ago
 - * But is about the presence of God in our world today
 - * The presence of God in our struggles, and in our neighbours' struggles
- And this is what we will see when, as Paul says, we “clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ”
 - When we do that the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given water, the stranger is welcomed, the naked are clothed, the ill are cared for, the prisoners are visited
- And not only will we be caring for the outcast, not only will we be proclaiming God's Kingdom, not only will we be casting the vision of a world that is based on love and not materialism
 - But we will be doing all those things for Jesus himself.
- The story that Jesus tells about the sheep and the goats was probably written not as a warning to those who did not do those things
 - But rather as an encouragement to those who were struggling
- The kingdom — and the king — that is hoped for is a kingdom of law and of justice
 - And justice doesn't just mean that I get mine, but that I may have to give up some of mine so that somebody else can also get theirs.

- If God deals justly with me, it also means that God has to deal justly with others - and vice versa.
 - But in that way God's kingdom is realised, is made real
- I think, I believe that this is what people need today
 - We need an alternative reality; not a reality that is proclaimed in a multi-million rand house and five-star overseas holidays
 - * but the alternative that is expressed in the hope of better things to come

CONCLUSION

- Let me close off.
 - Sign on a taxi:
 - “When days are dark friends are few”
- The function of the church in every age
 - The function of Christian is every age
- And the opportunity for the church and for the Christian
 - Is to be a friend — in good times — but especially in times of trouble
- And is to live with this message of hope, to be a light in the darkness
 - Not just for six weeks round about Christmas time, but always
- To live, to think, to speak words that speak of the hope of the coming of God's Kingdom in its fullness
- To live, to think, to speak words that demonstrate that our own lives are lived being clothed in the hope of Christ
- To live, to think, to speak words that take the prophetic and make it real in every situation that we encounter
 - in small ways — how we interact with our families — especially during Christmas! and at work, the office party!
 - In bigger ways that we choose to use what we have been blessed with — whether that money or talents or accidents of birth (eg good education)
- So that together with Christ we proclaim the new creation
 - May it be so for you this Christmas, even as it is for me.
- Amen

Prayer of Response and Intercession

- Hymn 804 — The Church of Christ in Every Age

Benediction

Doxology