

## Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2022 – ‘Hope for the world’ (Psalm 96, Isaiah 11:1-9)

It's not been a good week for hope in terms of our news. You don't need me to tell you what's been dominating our headlines, and our screens. And if you're anything like me, it's not just been on our screens, it's been on our minds and in our hearts. I have to ration my news diet to once or twice a day as it's just overwhelming.

As if that wasn't enough, we've also had what is (and I quote) the 'bleakest assessment yet' of the damage we're doing to our planet from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC. The door is closing on our efforts to stop permanent damage to our ecosystems.

So it's a fair question to ask, where is hope? Where can we find the title of our service today: hope for the world? Today we begin a new series called 'Surprised by hope', which is a great title for this Lent, because to find hope at the moment would indeed be something of a surprise – but that is my prayer for all of us, that even in these bleak times we'd be surprised by finding new hope.

Hope is such a powerful thing. Hope is not just wishful thinking: as we've shared before it is the confident expectation that one day things will be better than they are now. Whatever you hope for, hope is something inspirational, motivating – it gets us out of bed in the morning, puts unexpected peace and joy in our hearts during the day, and enables us to sleep at night.

So, **knowing where to find hope is like knowing where to mine for gold.** Think of all the gold rushes that sent hundreds of thousands of people migrating across continents, creating whole new communities and industries because they thought they could find gold there. We need a 'hope rush' at present – to know where we can find true hope, and to invest heavily in that.

Sadly too often the church has been accused of offering escapism rather than grounded faith. Perhaps some of you felt that when you listened to that beautiful passage from Isaiah. We love those images of predators and prey lying down together – but then we see the tanks rolling into Kherson, or the packed platforms at Lviv and it seems like what we are offering is fairy tales, like the band who kept playing their heart-warming tunes while the Titanic sank.

So let's tackle this head on – **what are we really offering? Where is the Christian vision of hope for the world?** Let's start by acknowledging that this vision of Isaiah is not a marketing ploy designed to make us feel better, a sort of distraction from what's really going on. God's plan for his creation really is to restore it to the beauty, perfection and peace it was always designed to have. Our fractured and broken world will *not* stay like this forever.

In the weeks to come, we'll look at what God's plan for a new heavens and earth and the resurrection of our bodies really means, and I hope it will stir our hearts to realise that the vision of what God is aiming at is way bigger and more amazing than we've yet appreciated. But today, let's start by affirming that **a renewed, perfected creation really is where we're heading.** However far we may feel from that at present, there is something glorious and beautiful to look forward to. As I took another large funeral this week, it reminded me how much it matters that we do have a real hope to offer all those tear-stained faces who gathered to mourn their friend.

But what I think we've lost sight of in the church is how we get to this restored and perfected creation. Too often we present this hope as something that sort of magically happens. Everything is bad, bad, bad, bad – and then, hey presto, it's all good!

Today's passages remind us of two beautiful truths that we urgently need to recover if we're to have the kind of resilient, grounded hope that truly does carry us through times like these.

The first we find in our psalm, and that is the fact that **God does, and will, judge the earth.** The judgement of God is the sort of doctrine we hardly talk about anymore. We treat God's judgement as the theological equivalent of the embarrassing uncle who sits in the corner drinking too much and telling inappropriate jokes at family get-togethers. You know, the sort of person we feel obliged to invite but we'd rather wasn't there, because you never know what he'll say or do next, and who he'll upset.

But you know, the older I get, **the more I realise how much we need to hold onto a strong faith in the judgement of God** – because at its heart, the judgement of God is the firm belief that one day God *will* put things right. That there will be a reckoning for those who persistently do wrong. That people who escaped judgement in this world will certainly face it before the throne of God. And conversely, that those who have been oppressed will be vindicated and set free: that God will judge with equity, and will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

Most of us who've watched the horrific scenes on our screens this week will have thought at some point – 'this evil cannot go unpunished.' And part of the good news of our faith is that it won't. That's why the psalmist tells us the whole of creation to rejoice, because 'God comes to judge the earth.' Maybe that idea has sounded odd to you in the past, that we should rejoice in God's judgement: but when I see missiles raining down on innocent civilians it doesn't sound odd to me. God is love – but he is also just and holy. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness. God's righteous and just judgement means that the innocent victims of this war will one day receive the justice they deserve.

Second, our passage in Isaiah tells us that **this judgement is mediated through a person.** One on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, who has wisdom and understanding, whose belt is righteousness and whose sash is faithfulness. Also one who is descended from King David – and we know who this is. Again, in the modern day church, we don't like to talk much about Jesus being the one who judges the world – ironically you'll find this preached far more often in mosques than in churches – it's part of orthodox Muslim belief that Jesus will be the agent of God's judgment.

And it's right to focus on Jesus' compassion. But let's not forget that his deep love for people also makes him deeply upset over injustice and oppression. Jesus judges the world *because* he loves it passionately. We buy too easily into the image of Jesus as an amiable hippy with sandals and long hair wandering aimlessly around the countryside. We need to keep reminding ourselves of the awesomeness of Jesus: the one who calms the storm in sight of his terrified disciples, who was hounded out of the Gerasene region in a matter of hours, who turfed out the moneylenders from the temple because their making a quick buck stopped people praying. This Jesus strikes the earth with the rod of his mouth – in the end, it cost him his life, as God's perfect justice and mercy met at the cross. **Perfect justice cost Jesus everything – and so today we can commend all the troubles of this world to him with confidence, because he walks the talk.** This God is not remote from the suffering of the world but totally immersed in it.

And may that thought restore surprising hope to us today: it may not stop the shelling right now, but we can pray for God to hear, and act, and judge, trusting in his righteousness and faithfulness. Let us hold onto this hope, and so to keep saying among the nations: 'The Lord reigns.' Amen.