

Father God as we wait for the coming of Christ may your holy word show us how to hope Amen

- So. What thoughts did go through your head as you heard our bible readings?
  - John the Baptist again? Or ... I think it's St Paul prattling on again. Or ... I need to start writing my Christmas cards today, or I'll never get the done
- Having had the privilege of reading them several times before this morning's worship, I was quite surprised to find two things that started off thought processes for me.
  - First both Paul and John the Baptist were in situations of great stress and danger.
  - Second, both Paul and John the Baptist speak with a huge amount of joy and hope.
- Here are some examples of the joy and hope.
  - *'constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.'*
  - *'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.'*
  - *'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*
- Do you feel joyful and full of hope today? Do you talk of the salvation of God when you think of refugees? Do you pray with joy in the wake of the latest Corona virus figures?
- And what is your hope? What is the Christian hope? And are they the same thing?

POSSIBLY TAKE ANSWERS TO THIS QUESTION FROM THE CONGREGATION

- I think some of the best definitions of Christian hope today can be found in today's readings, and in fact in the quotes I read out a few minutes ago which I used to demonstrate the joy and hope of the readings.
  - *'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.'*
  - *'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*
- *'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'* Simply put what, could be a greater expression of hope than that? Not just some flesh but all flesh. Not just all humans but all flesh. John the Baptist quotes these words of Isaiah? *'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'* to tell us to *'Prepare the way of the Lord'*.
- Jesus is coming and he wants us to be ready for him.
- And come Jesus did. And lived and died on earth and rose again, for John the Baptist and for us.
- That was the good work that Paul talks about when he said, *"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."*
  - The good work was the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The good work was the Holy Spirit challenging the lives of those early Christians in Philippi, to whom Paul was writing and calling them to turn to Christ.
- What difference did it make to them? What difference does it make to us, who have been challenged by the same Holy Spirit and who have responded by turning to Christ? What do we have that others don't?
- We have our own particular issues that threaten our lives today, which I hardly need to mention: the continuing threat of the Corona virus, climate change, and the rest.
- But actually life 2 000 years ago was more immediately terrifying and more immediately dangerous.
- Luke when he begins this passage has just finished the story of the birth and childhood of Jesus, with all its reliance on a God who chooses to be born in poverty; with all its talk of bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly.
- And he begins today's passage with a list of the rulers of the time. The powerful of the time. Those who were prophesied to be brought down.
  - This is partly so that we can date the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus accurately but actually he also does it for a much more important reason (and not just to challenge the ability of the reader to cope with tongue-twisters!) Take a look at the names he trots out.

- *'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*
- *'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius'.* Renowned even today as one of the most debauched and unpredictably cruel of the Caesars, who are not generally remembered for their benevolence and compassion, Tiberius was dangerously paranoid by the end of his reign. Much of the Roman Empire was already worshipping him as a god, but by this time his reign was one of pure terror.
- *'Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea'.* Well known by bible readers the world over as callous and vindictive, Pilate would clearly not have been a comfortable or reliable person to plead your case as a Jew.
- *'Herod was ruler of Galilee'.* A playboy who enjoyed watching his step-daughter's erotic dancing, Herod suffered from the inferiority complex of not being a proper Jew. Distrusted by the Jews and caught between them and his Roman overlords, Herod's reign typified that of a weak individual who wanted to be popular but wasn't.
- *'during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas'.* Caiaphas was Annas's son-in-law in this dynastic influential family. As head of the temple Caiaphas and Annas would have exercised virtually unrivalled power and privilege over the Jewish people. And they would have been jealous of sharing it.
- Would you have wanted this crowd controlling your life? Would you have felt safe? Would not the results of their control be evident as you looked at the crucifixes on the street corners, the Roman soldiers mercilessly beating a peasant and the poverty and danger of everyday life. Nothing was sacred. Not even the temple. Nothing was honourable. Not even Herod's palace. Even God was in danger of being supplanted by Tiberius. It was a wilderness. And God didn't seem to be doing anything about it.
- *'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*
- Of course the hope the Jews wanted was freedom from all this dreadful tyranny. The hope they got was, *'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*
- John came primarily to disturb rather than to comfort. To alter our view of hope and the meaning of life.
- Did you notice where St Paul was writing his letter from when he wrote this joyful epistle to the Philippians? *'you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment'* He was in prison. In those days if you were in prison, the only food you got was that provided for you by your family and friends. If you had no friends, to put it bluntly, you starved. Paul was almost certainly in prison in a foreign city with no family near at hand and it was only his Christian friends who kept him sustained. Is that what he means when talks of the Philippians who *'share in God's grace'* with him?
- And the Philippians themselves were persecuted and a beleaguered minority in an aggressively Gentile city. You only have to read a little more of the letter to discover this.
  - The great truth, out of many truths we haven't got time to look at, from Paul's writing to the Philippians is that God is a finisher and not just a beginner. *'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.'* *'so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.'* And who could ask for more than that. That was the Philippians' hope, rather different and more aligned to God than that of the beaten down Jews in the time of John the Baptist, 15 years earlier.
- What do these readings, so full of joy and hope in the midst of great suffering and need say to you in another age with anxieties and pain of a very different time?
- What do they say about how to let joy and hope help you with the uncertainty and materialism of modern life?
- What do they say about how to bring something honourable and valuable out of so much of life which seems self-centred and hopeless?
- What do they say about how to wait for Christ to complete his work so *'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*
- Do they allow you to hope?