

When the prophet Isaiah wrote:

*‘The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid*

it must have seemed to his contemporary readers like an impossible dream.

This same prophet wrote

He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They 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.

A dream of preace at a time when the Assyrian forces were strong – they were the wolves. By their own accounts they were cruel and brutal. There was no way that a small nation could withstand such power let alone expect those who wielded the power voluntarily to turn aside from violence.

The farmer tending his vines and pruning his fig trees could only watch helpless as the invading army plundered and destroyed. What power did he have? Everything was decided, won or lost, by the actions of the leaders of nations, and the generals of their armies. Those that actually used the plough shares and pruning hooks had no voice. Yet here was a prophet speaking of this dream, of the power of God that could restore and renew, that could create peace out of chaos, and a new world out of destruction.

Even when the Assyrians were doing their worst, there could be hope.

Thousands of years later, peace and justice are still elusive. The dream of the Kingdom of God remains a dream, apparently no closer to realisation than all those centuries before.

Having recently returned from Israel/Palestine, my abiding memory is of the shocking division wall that snakes around villages and towns, often separating farm houses from the olive groves and vineyards that were their portion of the land. Huge new settlements, some of them with tens of thousands of inhabitants, rise up out of the ancient farmland, and those that depended upon that small income, those that pruned and ploughed, have no voice.

Next door, in Lebanon, refugees pour over the border from war torn Syria, the tired, the injured, and the despairing.

This region that struggles to accommodate people of the three great Abrahamic faiths is deeply divided, not only between Christian, Jew and Muslim, but even, as we know only too well, within

each faith group. The complexities of the political situation defy definition, for all sides see themselves as victims, all as persecuted minorities in a hostile world.

It is hard to see how there can ever be peace or justice in that land.

It would be easy indeed to give in to despair, to give up the dream, the promise of that future time when no-one shall make anyone afraid.

It is particularly easy for us to follow that counsel of despair, to say “there is no solution, it is not of our making”. For it is not our war. Not our struggle. Perhaps we might even claim that it is not really much of our responsibility.

But if hope for peace in the Middle East dies, if we allow the dream of the prophets to fade, what is left? Each person for themselves, each nation for itself, the devil take the hindmost?

The good news is that the dream has not disappeared completely. Hope has not died. Many projects and institutions quietly seek to bring about reconciliation and understanding. The Christian-run school of nursing that trains a clear majority of Muslim students, that battles against prejudices of the Israeli medical establishment; the school for severely handicapped children that works so hard to ensure that these children became fully integrated into society, struggling on a daily basis to guide disabled children from the West Bank through the armed check points so that they can simply get to school; the reconciliation groups that bring mothers and children of different faiths together. These are beacons of hope. These by word and deed state: “Do not demonise. Do not be bitter. Counteract prejudice and division with acts of love and by seeing Christ in all”.

The prophecy of Isaiah may have been written at a particular time, for a particular people and situation, but his words are relevant now, and not just to the Middle East but to the whole world. Life without hope is empty and inward looking, centred upon self. The Christian hope is encapsulated in the writings of Paul: “

‘The root of Jesse shall come,  
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;  
in him the Gentiles shall hope.’

This is the promise, the promise of Christ reconciling the whole world to himself - all people, all nations, all creation. Hope for a kingdom that is both of the future and yet rooted in the present, the here and now. A kingdom that is accessible to all.

Keeping that hope alive is as important to us as it was in the time of Isaiah. Yet despair, and the understandable tears that go with it, are not the main enemy of hope. It is apathy, that complete abdication of any sense of responsibility or engagement that distances us from pain, from suffering, from injustice.

Oppression of the poor by the rich has always been condemned by the prophets. But so too has indifference, the casual, lazy acceptance of injustice and unrighteousness. We have seen a growing failure really to challenge wrong in our own society – amid a slow erosion of the ideals of honour, integrity, honesty. This indifference to righteousness, this apathy, is as damaging to hope as is despair. It eats away at hope gradually, slowly, without anyone noticing until it is gone.

Yet the power of God that can restore and renew, that can create peace out of chaos, and a new world out of destruction is still at work.

In Wimbledon there are Food Banks and night shelters; small signs of hope. Another small beacon is the way the different faith communities, despite their often deep differences, are reaching across the divide to work together to provide services like night shelters, with the Wimbledon Mosque providing Christmas Lunch and offering those seeking shelter from the elements on Christmas Eve a lift to and from Midnight Mass. An acceptance from a faith community that as a society we seem often determined to demonise that all people are worthy of love and concern, that transcends our manmade divisions.

In South Africa, we saw how Nelson Mandela refused to allow bitterness to rule his life and brought into being the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and demonstrated hope in a deeply divided land where injustice was the norm.

The world can change.

Isaiah provides us with a vision of how this world could be, if people cared for one another, cared for the environment, if they were in awe of the beauty and splendour of creation. A truly wonderful vision that should inspire and guide us. God's kingdom here and now, on earth as it is in heaven.

We catch glimpses of this kingdom each time we encounter self-giving love. This is our inspiration, this is our hope. Faith is not ever simply an act of will. But when we decide to offer ourselves, in service, in love, when we decide to live as though this dream of God's kingdom can become a reality, then faith and hope spring in to being and our outlook on life is transformed.

The message of the cross, of Jesus Christ who died for us, is that with love all things are possible. There is no cause to give in to the despair which denies hope. There can be no excuse for the apathy which destroys hope, for that abdication of responsibility which erodes the values that can give rise to hope.

Paul reminds the Romans that Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

This is the work, our work, for Advent, the time of preparation, the time for recognising and sowing the seeds of hope so that today, in a few years or thousands upon thousands of years, God's kingdom will come, his will be done, on earth as in heaven. Amen.