

Sunday 8th December 2019. Second Sunday of Advent. Canongate Kirk.

Romans 15:13 *...so that you may abound in hope...*

In his autobiography “The Long Walk to Freedom” the late Nelson Mandela wrote these words: *No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.* They were words of course that he illustrated by his own capacity to love even those who hated him and whom he had once hated in return, his extraordinary capacity to advocate reconciliation rather than revenge, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. There’s not been much love lost between the opposing forces of the current General Election campaign, but perhaps as polling day draws near such thoughts of reconciliation are a timely reminder of what somehow needs to happen between those who have been so bitterly opposed and divided if there’s to be even a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

With candles of hope and peace now flickering on our Advent crown, all our readings for this second Sunday of Advent reflect another timely reminder of the darkness and despair of the various ages in which they were set down, but also the growing sense of hope for peace which was prevalent among the people for whom they were intended. And in the eleventh chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, the hope for peace brings with it a promise of the sort of reconciliation between opposites which would surely have gladdened Nelson’s Mandela’s heart. The passage dates right back to the latter half of the eighth century BC and to a time when the kingdom of Judah was threatened by a much more powerful neighbour, Assyria. Isaiah insisted that the real threat to the life of Judah was not simply the might of the Assyrian army, but the nation’s own sin and disobedience to God, and their persistent lack of trust in him. And if only they would turn back to God and to the way of living and believing that was pleasing to him, then they need fear no hostile oppressor, no ruthless persecutor. They could and would live side by side, and at peace one with the other, reconciled, however uneven the odds stacked against them. “Then the wolf shall live with the lamb”, Isaiah predicted, “and the leopard shall lie down with the kid”.

And he develops the theme of unlikely friends and improbable neighbours, of opposites finding reconciliation, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear, the young child and the adder, each of them just as unlikely friends and improbable neighbours as Judah and Assyria, each of them holding out the prospect of an alliance, an understanding, between two very unevenly matched sides, on the one side gentle and vulnerable and on the other typically ferocious and predatory. The lamb and the wolf, the kid and the leopard, the calf and the young lion, the cow and the bear, the young child and the snake, love and hate, Judah and Assyria. These are all wonderfully creative metaphors that must have touched the people’s imagination, and brought them in the midst of all their darkness and despair a profound sense of hope, however overwhelming the forces ranged against them. The hope of possibilities beyond their wildest imagining, the hope for peace and justice and reconciliation, the hope for the earth full with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. *...so that you may abound in hope...*

*When out of poverty is born
a dream that will not die,*

*and landless, weary folk find strength
to stand with heads held high.
It's then we learn from those who wait
To greet the promised day,
"The Lord is coming, don't lose heart,
Be blest, prepare the way".*

St Paul's letter to the Romans was written to prepare the way for a visit Paul planned to make to the church at Rome. And if ever there was a lamb at the mercy of the hungry wolf or a kid in the sights of the greedy leopard, then surely it was the early Christian church struggling to establish itself, young and innocent and vulnerable at the very heart of the mighty Roman empire, for all the world like a young child dancing over the adder's den. They would be only too familiar with these images that Isaiah had painted so vividly many centuries before. And St Paul only reminds them further of the relevance of ancient scripture to their contemporary situation. "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction", he tells them, "so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope". He knew only too well how much they needed steadfastness right now. He knew only too well how much they needed hope. He knew only too well how much they needed encouragement. "so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope". And in his search for inspiration he quotes directly from the prophet Isaiah: "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope" ...*so that you may abound in hope...*

And finally in our Gospel reading John the Baptist, appearing in the Judean wilderness and also quoting Isaiah, and like Isaiah struggling to bring the people back in touch with God, back from the brink of the abyss into which their own sinfulness and waywardness would inevitably lead them. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" he cried in the wilderness. It's nearly thirty years since Nelson Mandela came in from the wilderness of his long imprisonment, calling not for repentance but for reconciliation, for love instead of hate, for peace and justice and freedom for all who were oppressed, daring not just to speak out but to live out the ideals for which he had been willing to die, clinging to a hope that would not and will not die.

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*All praise to you, eternal Son,
Whose advent has our freedom won,
Whom with the Father we adore,
And Holy Spirit evermore.*

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. So that you may abound in hope, whatever these next few days may bring. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever.

Amen.