

## **“Christmas Hope”**

**Sermon - Gregor Henderson**

**Wesley Uniting Church, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2011**

**Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8**

It took a long while for the early Christians to decide that Christmas was worth celebrating. Many early Christian communities knew nothing of the Christmas stories. Take the community from which Mark's gospel came for instance - no birth stories here, no annunciation, no Bethlehem, no shepherds, no angels, no wise men, no baby lying in a manger. Mark instead commences with the ministry of John the Baptist. The apostle Paul who travelled widely throughout the early church appears to have known nothing of Christmas either. Nor does John, writer of our 4<sup>th</sup> gospel. Only Matthew and Luke tell us about Jesus' birth.

In fact it took about 300 years before Christmas came to be widely celebrated by Christians, and even then – and still today – there is argument about the correct date, 25 December, 6 January or some other date altogether. And 350 years ago, when Puritans held sway in the government of England, Christmas was actually banned for several years by government decree. It's had a chequered history, not always seen as a reason for celebration.

An earlier bunch of people of faith felt they had nothing to celebrate too. Back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC the people of Israel were in exile. They'd been conquered by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, and banished from their homeland and their loved city of Jerusalem. But there in captivity a prophet spoke to them. He's the prophet referred to as second Isaiah, whose writings are found in the book of Isaiah from chapters 40 to 55. He looks at what's happening in the world around them, he listens for God's word, and he proclaims to the sorrowing people a terrific message of hope. "Comfort, comfort, my people" says God, he tells them. Your time of suffering is coming to an end. He then casts several beautiful images of hope for them – a highway between Babylon and Jerusalem, with the mountains levelled and the rough ground smoothed, on which God will lead them back to their homeland; a herald high on a mountain announcing the tremendous good tidings of God's new activity for his people; the portrayal of this God of might tenderly gathering his people and feeding them like a shepherd. Isaiah brought renewed hope to people whose lives and purpose had been destroyed. And within a few years Babylon was gone, Persia reigned, and the Persian policy of restoring exiled people to their homelands was implemented.

Fast forward 500 years or so, to around the year 25AD. The people of Israel are again oppressed, this time by the Romans who taxed them heavily, forced their own culture upon them and had little respect for Jewish traditions and Jewish faith. Any protests or acts of rebellion were ruthlessly crushed. Then appears this prophet John the Baptist. Like second Isaiah he renews hope. Like second Isaiah he preaches God's forgiveness and God's fresh action for his people. One is coming, he says, much greater than me, who will gift you with the Holy Spirit, the certainty of God's presence and power for you. And the people's heads are lifted, their backs straightened, for hope grows within them.

The coming of Jesus boosts our hopefulness. We all need hope. For our human lives inevitably mean there are events, difficulties, hurts, tragedies which knock us, which drain life and hope from us. It may be some event from years ago that still holds us captive. It may be an illness or disability that restricts our living. It may be the loss of parents or spouse or children that casts a deep shadow over us. It may be some negative character trait that we can never quite overcome.

In the coming of Jesus, God is restoring our hope. And this is no vague sort of hopefulness, no mere wishful thinking. Second Isaiah looked at the world and saw that the Babylonians were waning, the Persians were coming and he knew the Persian policy of restoring exiled peoples. He also knew the nature of God – forgiveness, persistence, power, compassion, tenderness. His word of hope was well founded. So is John the Baptist's message of hope – he knew that God was acting in Jesus with extraordinary love and power. He knew that God was about to gift the Holy Spirit, God's constant loving presence, to be with his people always, every day, everywhere. His word of hope was well founded.

Thanks God that the church did eventually come to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas is coming again, and we will celebrate it. For the coming of Christ brings to us a ceaseless renewal of hope. God's Holy Spirit, God's loving presence, power and peace are available to us. Receive afresh from God as we worship today, as we receive Communion, as we sense again God's gift to us of hope through Jesus, God's Christmas gift to us all.

To the glory of God. Amen.