

Darkness before the dawn (8.12.2024)

Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11; Malachi 3:1-4

“The night is darkest just before the dawn”. So said Harvey Dent in one of the Batman films. I am completely convinced this is wrong – just before the dawn, surely rays of light are beginning to creep into the sky?...but the point is, when things are dark, hope is on the way.

Now, Batman might offer hope for Gotham City, but as far as he’s concerned, the rest of the world has to get on with our own problems! I don’t think he’s ever spent a weekend cleaning up Geneva’s streets...

But our passages of scripture today are pointing us to a **global hope that is coming – and to a God who is faithful and firm.**

As I was doing some reading for today, I came across information about why we are given such a detailed list of leaders in Luke’s gospel.

You have **Caesar Tiberius** – the Roman Emperor. Second Emperor, Tiberius was beginning to decline and descend into depression. He went away to the island of Capri, and, absent from Rome, rumours sprang up of his depravity and cruelty. He banished Jews from Rome and ordered Jews of military age to join the Roman army. It forced those seeking to be loyal to God into hiding or into compromise: one could not serve under the Eagle of Rome and not engage in Emperor worship, an act of idolatry. The pressure was on.

You have **Pontius Pilate**. Described as ruthless, inflexible, and relentless. He was determined and really took a dim view of the Jews among whom he was to rule. He enforced some aspects of Emperor worship in Jerusalem and stole money from the temple treasury. He made life difficult.

You have **Herod the Tetrarch** – a son of Herod the Great, **Herod Antipas**, also the Tetrarch, pushed Greek pagan culture in Israel and put up many idolatrous images. His only loyalty was to Rome, not to the people over whom he was supposedly a king.

You have **Philip the Tetrarch** – who like his brother, also pushed pagan Greek culture in what was supposed to be the holy land.

4 really bad guys, putting on the pressure! And then we have **Lysanias of Abilene...** of which we know hardly anything!

But there are also **Annas** and **Caiaphas**, high priests. Annas was a high priest who set up almost dynastic control over the office. His sons and son-in-law, Caiaphas, secured control over the high priesthood and thus over religious life in Israel – ensuring a much too cosy relationship with the Roman occupying power.

It's not an optimistic background. It's one of oppression, an encroaching world, corruption in the highest places of religion, and a seemingly impossible fight against secular culture.

Sounds **exactly like today!** And yet into that, the word of God came to a prophet.

More than 350 million Christians are under active **persecution** today. In the Holy Land, the population of Christians has shrunk from 20% to less than 2%, suffering oppression from every side in the conflicts. **Democracy** across the world is **in retreat** – China, Russia, the Middle East, and of course in its homelands, democracy is creaking – we mention the USA, but also South Korea's president tried to impose martial law for a non-urgent political reason!

Meanwhile, Christian foundations are being eroded – the **sanctity of marriage** is downgraded as divorce is made easier, and people marry in pubs seeking a fun day rather than understanding the immense commitment being undertaken. **Pornography** is now prevalent in society: 1/10 children under nine years old have seen porn, 75% of teens have seen porn, and these are probably conservative estimates.

And this all plays into **seeing each other as objects**, leading to the abuse of other people and destroying the psychology of both the victim and the perpetrator. 3 million children are bought and sold as slaves – most for sex – in the USA every year.

The world is in a mess and the forces of darkness are advancing.

And if you think the church is spotless, think again...

The leader of one church in this world is supporting a war. Other churches around the world are involved in bribery and corruption. There are political manoeuvrings in some church institutions to secure the control of people at the top. Leaders are split on all sorts of issues, and the world looks down on us for failing to confront paedophiles who operated under our auspices. **The church is also a mess.**

What do we do? Throw up our hands and despair?

“During the high priesthood – the corrupt high priesthood – of Annas and Caiphas, **the word of God came** to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness”.

Today we lit the second advent candle. It is for the **prophets**. I dare to say: **it is for us!** This messy group of people, us, the church, is called to be prophetic!

When everyone shares their gifting and commits to Jesus, then **the church is the hope of this world, because we are the body of Christ and he works through us!**

So what do prophets do? Biblically, they remind the world of God's law, instruction, counsel, and teaching. Prophets point to somewhere else; a vision of what could be, and what will be.

The word of God came to John the Baptist, son of Zechariah. John was commissioned to tell the people that even though Tiberius was Emperor, and expelling people from Rome and forcing idol worship; even though Pilate was cruelly robbing their society; even though

Antipas and Philip were pushing aggressive secularism and pagan behaviour, and even though the “church” hierarchy was corrupt, **God saw, had not forgotten, and was going to act.** It was a message of hope in a dark time!

Paul in Philippians was also writing to encourage: he reminds them that God started a work in them, and **God is faithful to finish his work. Those who are faithful to God will not be abandoned.** Just as they shared in the grace given to Paul – by being with him in imprisonment, and by standing to defend the good news of Jesus – so God will be faithful to finish his good work in them.

Paul prays that they will **know how to live purely, and to produce a harvest of righteousness that brings praise to God.**

In our modern world, don't we need to hear this? **This is Paul's prayer for us too!** Our lives are lives called to produce a harvest of righteousness that brings praise to God!

We live in a world that is aggressively secular. You have freedom of speech so long as it matches the ideology of the day. The world is increasingly hostile to Christian faith, and God's people can feel under siege.

But we are called to be prophets! And prophets **stand firm!** The church is often a mess, but it's not everyone in the church – there are always a **faithful remnant!** And the Word of God comes to the faithful remnant, and says “head to the wilderness – away from the city of people – head to the wilderness, where you are more vulnerable.” And when you are there, go into the water and come out as a new person, baptised into repentance, letting God refine you, and emerging committed to the Way of Jesus. **Turn from this world, turn to Christ, and produce the harvest of righteousness that brings praise to God.**

And when you return from the desert and re-enter the city of humans, embrace the way of Jesus: Love the refugee and homeless. Care for the sick and dying. Refuse to worship consumerism or social media. Spend your time and money on helping people who can't help you. Find conflicts, and try to bring peace. Stand up for those who are doing no wrong yet vilified by the mob. Seek to advocate for those who are suffering.

This is the not-so-easy life of the Prophet. We point this world to a new way of living, and to hope. That in this dark world, God has seen, heard and is coming.

The night is dark, but there is a dawn coming. Take heart, take hope. We are the prophets of God, his messengers, called to prepare the way of the Lord. God will come, but is not the real mystery of Christmas that God does come, not with armies, but as a human? He comes as us...in us...

And so, my fellow prophets, what does that say? Immanuel, God with us, comes as us and through us, his broken, messy church.

Let us acknowledge that calling on us, it is heavy. Let us repent and recommit to Christ. And let us produce that harvest of righteousness that brings praise to God! **Let's be the prophets that God call us to be!**