

Fearful Future?

Isaiah 63:7-9, Matthew 2:13-23

29 December 2019

Could there be a better way to close the year 2019, than to repeat Isaiah's words allocated for today by the Lectionary from the Hebrew Bible (and I am using the words from the ERV)?

"I will remember the kind things the Lord has done and I will remember to praise him. The Lord has been very kind to us. He has shown us mercy."

As we call to mind the events of the past year can we see with the prophet how in all our difficulties we were held by God's goodness and kindness? How our mistakes and false steps were covered by God's mercy and grace? How, even our doubts and questionings were more than matched by God's love and faithfulness? There are, indeed, so many reasons to be thankful for on this last Sunday of the year. Just the Sunday before and during the week in between we have remembered the birth of Jesus, God's great gift to the world and I trust, you have all found a meaningful way to celebrate the occasion.

But even before then, there may have been other births of new babies in some of our families bringing joy and delight into our lives. We can also be thankful for the new additions to our church family here at AFC enlarging and enriching the life of our community. There may have been new relationships forged, new friendships, new families built realising the fruitful potential of human togetherness. There were some nice holidays enjoyed with well-deserved rest and a lot of traveling, visiting nearer or more faraway places, seeing members of family or getting to know the richness of God's good creation and of human ingenuity, which produced some of the marvels of this planet. Some of us experienced successful medical interventions following illness or accidents giving us better health and improved quality of life. There were personal and group achievements to celebrate, which gladdened the hearts of all of us. There may have been new projects started, new knowledge acquired, new recognitions dawned to help us understand our role as creatures and creators of our world. We may have received many spiritual blessings, which deepened our faith and strengthened our

commitment to God and to each other. For all this, and for other things, too numerous to mention, we can and do bring our heartfelt thanks and praise to God.

But however much we would like to dwell on the good things of the year gone by, our NT reading reminds us with a jolt of sober realism of the other side of the Christmas glow, of the shadows that are forever lurking around any light. We know how unrealistic it would be to ignore the heart-ache some of us have experienced in 2019. The personal losses, the disappointments, the lives of loved ones that have been lost all too soon. And even Christmas itself is often talked about as one of the most stressful times of the year for some, quite often prepared for with great expectations and ending up in anxiety, disharmony, or loneliness doubly felt by others' merriment. And, of course, this year was also the year of political upheaval in our own country, while the civil unrests and wars continued unabated in other parts of the world.

Well, I daresay, it was no different in Jesus' time. Life was experienced as a great mixture of ups and downs, and the story of Joseph and Mary and of the infant Jesus was no exception. We have hardly waved good bye to the colourful visitors from the East, and right away we meet an infamous character who spoils the joyful events around the birth of this special baby. As we leave the Isaiah reading behind, and turn our attention to the Gospel we discover a little-known connection between the two readings. A few verses before the passage we've just read from Isaiah, the prophet expresses God's strongest judgement over the land of Edom, Israel's historic enemies. And the person, who so drastically interrupts Matthew's account of Jesus' nativity, is none other than King Herod the Great, an Edomite by birth, who only later converted to Judaism and who, for this very reason, was not regarded as a rightful King of Judea at all.

He was ambitious and ruthless, a client king of the Romans, whose rule was known by his widespread building projects both religious and military and who financed these projects from the crippling taxation of the Judean population. He had to keep Rome, the Jewish ruling classes, the Jewish religious leaders and the discontented population happy, which made him a calculating politician, forever looking over his shoulders for approaching danger to his rule. And with good reason, because he had to contend with regular attempts to dethrone him by members of his own family as

well as others in his entourage. So, no wonder that the Christmas message of 'bringing great joy to the whole people' declared by the angels would not be good news to Herod. Neither was the appearance of some foreign dignitaries, who were talking about disturbing prophecies: A rival King, no less, was born! Someone, with far better credentials and real claim to rule over Israel.

A great fear grabbed him concerning the future: what if? What if the ominous signs become a reality? What if this 'other king' makes a bid for the crown? What if all the fortresses built, the highly paid soldiers kept close, the carefully selected temple authorities, were still not enough to keep him in power? Well, I think we too know of fears about our future. Over the Christmas holiday I have talked to one of my nephews. He is an earnest young man with 20 years of teaching experience behind him. He said how worried and fearful he was about the future. With the growing of his two children, he increasingly finds that his salary does not keep pace with the demands of his family commitments. He loves his teaching, yet when he sees that he could earn far more with some menial job requiring far less work, knowledge or experience than he has, he is sorely tempted to leave his current job for fear of letting his family down. His parents strongly urge him to keep to his vocation, but, of course, it's not them who have to manage his domestic budget!

Another friend talks about her health worries. There are some pending medical tests, what if there are bad news to come in the New Year? There are older, lonely people, who do not see much point in being around anymore, with no purpose or goal to strive for, fearing another meaningless year stretching out before them. What if 2020 will be an even worse year than 2019 was? Further afield there are thousands of children with or without their parents in crowded refugee camps fearing an uncertain future between their old war-torn and devastated homes and a hostile new world, which may or may not give them safe haven.

And then there is Joseph, who too has a young wife and a brand new baby to worry about, sensing the great danger they are all in and who, through the leading of divine inspiration decides to take his family to a foreign land to save them for a better, safer future. Two men, Herod and Joseph, both fearful for the future and two very different ways of dealing with their fears. One turns to fight to keep himself safe, the other listens inside to hear the voice of

God, trusts in its saving power and thus manages to keep alive the Bringer of salvation, even if it means a temporary flight.

Matthew the Evangelist writes this story packed with OT references and imagery to a Jewish Christian audience to affirm his conviction that Jesus is, indeed, the long-awaited Saviour, God's own anointed, and because he has been kept safe, so will his followers be. But in a symbolic way, it is also a timeless testimony of a very real human experience: God can be trusted in the most hopeless and fearful of situations. And it is posing the question to us on this last Sunday of the year: what will be the way for us to keep alive the faith and hope for the future? Will it be a fight or a flight? Will it be just our future, or will it be God's future?

The promise and the assurance is that the right kind of fear, the fear of the Lord, - which is, in fact, a deep trust in God's upholding guidance, - will reveal the God, who travels with us from one year to another. Of course, we are not going to be spared the hardships, for as we know even Jesus was not. After all, following a couple of further dreams by Joseph, he ended up in Nazareth. Now Nazareth was not the most illustrious of places in Galilee. In fact, it was held by some as a collaborator town due to the Roman garrison stationed there at the time. Hence the saying: 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Surely, the promised Saviour can not come from a place like that! Further more, Jesus ended up on a cross of shame. This was impossible! Surely, God's Messiah can not die in such a way! Yet, just like Jesus did, we too may rely on the faithfulness and kindness of our accompanying God, a very present God indeed, Immanuel – God with us, who kept Jesus alive through pain and death for our future. With this God by our side and with Jesus, as our icon, through whom we can see this God, and a model to follow, we can indeed step into 2020 without fear. May the Spirit aid us as we do.

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