

The Message of the Prophets #2

Isaiah 40:1-11

Acts 8:26-40

Luke 4:16-21

I don't know if you are partial to TV 'box sets'? You know, the ones where you get a whole series in one so you can binge watch the entire season in one go.

We first came across the idea as a literal 'box set' – the entire first series of Broadchurch, the detective drama set in Dorset, starring David Tennant. In a box. We started off determined only to watch one episode per evening.... That didn't last long!

Most series now end with what is called a "season finale" – a high octane, high drama episode which rounds off the current season, and gives tantalising glimpses of what is to come next.

This week's sermon and last week's are a bit like a two-part "season finale" to the Old Testament.

Last week's had the subtitle 'The nation turns away from God,' and we heard the story of how, first of all the People of God split into two kingdoms, and then – despite their covenant promises, and the entreaties of the prophets – how both lost sight of the One True God, and insisted on going their own way.

We heard that the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrian empire and was wiped out, and finally how the southern kingdom also fell, the people taken off into exile in Babylon and the Temple destroyed. Their identity as the People of God appeared to have been obliterated. You can almost imagine the title credits rolling as the people are led away, with the Temple burning in the background.

But last week was a little one-sided, as we only looked at the failure of the People of God to keep their side of the Covenant. This week, we turn our attention to God's side, to the promises God made to his people. The Message of the Prophets part 2 – A New Hope.

It's possible to look at the events of the end of the Northern Kingdom and the Fall of Jerusalem as signs of God's wrath, God's vengeance. Some might add

punishment to that list. And that's certainly a lens through which some have seen them.

But it's also possible to see them through a different lens – that what happened was the consequence of their actions – a consequence which God had warned them against. A warning which they had chosen to ignore. A bit like the situation where a loving parent will warn time after time after time about the dangers of climbing on the back of the armchair, but the child persists – until finally they fall off and get hurt.

God's people were fickle and unfaithful.
But God is unchanging, constant in his love.

And even before disaster strikes the kingdoms, God is offering signs of hope beyond catastrophe. Last week we heard about the prophet Hosea fruitlessly calling the people of the northern kingdom to return to God.

And yet in the very last chapter of the book which bears Hosea's name God says

“I will heal their waywardness
and love them freely,
for my anger has turned away from them.”

Hosea 14:4

And Jeremiah, who preached the powerful words to the people of Judah which we heard last week, was also called to preach these words of consolation, even before the people had been taken off into captivity in Babylon.

“I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. “

Jer 33:6-7

And, in fact, that is what happens. Around 125 years after the Fall of Jerusalem, a group of the Israelites, the People of God, return to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra, followed 25 years later by another group lead by Nehemiah. They recolonise the land of Judah and build a new temple in Jerusalem. But it is nowhere near as splendid as the first Temple, and the Glory of the Lord does not return to live in it. And over the next 400+ years there is a sense of a story unfinished, as the people lurch from one occupation to

another, culminating in assimilation into the Roman empire. Has God really forgotten his covenant?

Yet, Jeremiah had prophesied

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors...
“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

Jer 31:31-33

More is yet to come. God offers hope – hope of restoration and a new future.

Hope – a word we use a lot, and especially in these Covid-times. Like many words, it has more than one meaning, which are kind of in the same ballpark, but are very distinct.

“I hope there will be cake,” is one. A vague, optimistic sensation. As if our positivity can somehow bring the desired outcome into reality.

But there’s a different meaning to the word hope – and it’s this meaning that we mean when we talk about God’s hope. It’s the sense we mean when we say we are “planting bulbs as we hope for Spring.”

It’s something for which we have to wait, but which is sure and certain. It has a bit of a sense of something being wound up and ready to go at the right time. Maybe that is why we call Spring spring. It’s when all that potential is unleashed, just like a coiled spring.

‘Something for which we have to wait, but which is sure and certain’.
Something – or **someone**.

And it's the prophecies attributed to Isaiah which give most shape to the new future promised to the People of God – of God's promise of what – or to be more accurate, *who* – is to come. And of what he will do.

Many of our beloved Advent and Christmas readings are drawn from Isaiah's writings.

The child called Immanuel, God is with us

The descendant of King David who will be filled with the Spirit of God,
and who will rule with great wisdom and bring peace

And the OT reading we had this morning – words of comfort and hope. Words echoed by John the Baptist as he prepares the way for the coming of Jesus.

Plus the words which foretell a new People of God – no longer limited just to those who are descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but extends to the Gentiles – those who are not of Jewish heritage

And now the Lord says....

“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

Isaiah 49:5-6

Words quoted by Simeon as Jesus is presented in the Temple, and which we recall at Candlemas.

Isaiah is the source of the words Jesus spoke at the start of his ministry in Galilee, which we just heard in our Gospel reading; and of those we recall during Holy Week, which alert us to the costliness of God's love, as Jesus, the suffering servant is lifted up on the Cross

See, my servant will act wisely[Ⓜ];
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted...

He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
He was oppressed and afflicted....
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.

Taken from Isaiah 52&53

But it is not only Isaiah: Hosea speaks of God's restoration 'after 3 days' and Joel foretells the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all believers.

The promises of God – bringing hope to their first hearers, and to those in the 500+ years between the prophecy and the birth of Jesus

Hope to the first followers of Jesus as they reconnected with *God's* vision of the Messiah, David's heir, King and Shepherd.

And hope to us today as we know that through Jesus we too are part of the people of God.

And yet – there is still more in this “season finale” – a hint of the completion of the whole story – the full box set.

For within the words of the ancient prophets there are hints and pictures of the ultimate fulfilment of the story arc. Of restoration, not just of Jerusalem and of the Israelite People of God, but of a new creation, without pain or suffering, where the new People of God will live in peace and harmony. A picture amplified by St John at the very end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, where he links it with resurrection and a new life lived in the presence of God.

In my first year at university, I went to the cinema with a friend, to watch the new film sensation – Star Wars. Maybe you've seen it too. Maybe you can even remember the sub-title of the first film to be released. A New Hope.

In these days of CGI images, it's hard to recall just how jaw-droppingly stunning the whole thing was – especially on a huge cinema screen. At the beginning, a

spaceship zooms across the picture. It's clearly being chased, as it's firing desperately on something which is following it. What that something *is* soon becomes apparent. It's another spaceship, which as it first emerges from the top of the picture, seems like your average 1960s Star Trek type vessel. But here's the thing. It just keeps emerging – more and more of it. I dug out the DVD this week and timed it. It takes 11 seconds for the whole ship to appear on the screen. The size and scale of it is immense.

To this day I remember the sensation of sheer size. Of how everything that I had previously experienced being dwarfed in comparison with this image.

Now – there is no way in which I want to compare the wonder of the Hope of what God promises will be our future to a spaceship of the galactic empire! But there is an analogy here – which is that in comparison with our current experience, the hope to which God invites us is unlimited in its scale and splendour. It is beyond our current comprehension. But it is God's promise to we who believe and trust in Him. New life, lived in the Presence of God.

So – season finale – hinting at series finale. For the next couple of weeks we will be thinking about harvest themes, and then we start Season 2 – the New Testament, as we begin to pick up the story of the source and gateway into that New Life – the story of Jesus.