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A different kind of busyness?

I suspect that it's this week that the oddness of Christmas 2020 is really going to start to bite. This is the week when 'normally' many of us would be up to our ears in school nativities and Christmas concerts, when our churches would be putting on their finery, when we'd begin to wonder in earnest about how we were going to fit everything in, literally and metaphorically.

Of course, nine months of online, telephone and YouTube services have stood us in good stead for this Christmas, and I'm sure that many of you are just as busy as 'normal', but this year juggling Zoom meetings and service recordings instead of groups of five-year-olds wearing tea towels on their heads.

Whatever this week looks like for you, whether you're feeling energised by the new or grief-stricken by the loss of the familiar, we pray that you'll know the presence of Jesus as you navigate this week.

A blessing for Advent

May you hear the gentle voice of the One who speaks to you saying, 'well done, [your name!], good and faithful servant'.

May you feel the loving arms of the One who assures you that 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

May you see the light that shines in the darkness, that the darkness cannot overcome.

In this time of uncertainty, confusion, pain and waiting, may you experience the hope that comes from knowing that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Amen.

Louise, on behalf of the wider Arthur Rank Centre team

Bible readings

Isaiah 45:6b-8, 18, 21b-end

Luke 7:18b-23

John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' When the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"'

Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

Reflection

In many stories, there is a climactic moment when, all seemingly lost, the cavalry – sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical – appears over the horizon. For dramatic effect, that help is usually sudden and unexpected but in the final reckoning hope is restored.

I was reminded of this by this week's reading from the prophet Isaiah. Chapter 45 speaks of God's anointing of Cyrus to liberate the people of God from their Babylonian exile. The excerpts in our reading point out that it is by God's power that this is accomplished for the sake of his people.

In the reading from the gospel of Luke you can almost tell the excitement of the disciples of John as they approach Jesus and ask if he is the one who is expected, the one who will again free God's people from tyranny. They are desperate to have their hope kindled that the time had come for God's cavalry to arrive.

Jesus' answer exceeds their expectations. He points to a liberation that is not just that of oppression by a foreign power, but one that gives hope to the weak, the vulnerable and the poor.

As this year draws to a close, we find ourselves bereaved and exhausted by COVID-19 and the measures taken to curb its spread. The onset of winter adds to the gloom we feel, and our mental health is at breaking point. However, the promised cavalry of vaccination appears to be on the horizon, even though we are told it will take a few months to reach us all. More importantly, the promised hope of Jesus is also on the horizon as we look towards Christmas and our celebration of his birth.

This promise of hope brings a new perspective on the weeks and months ahead of us. While a vaccine offers hope that life might one day return to 'normal', the celebration of Jesus' birth reminds us of his promise of liberation, of a life together marked by freedom, justice, love and compassion.

This is the future that Jesus promises; we pray it will strengthen us as we go beyond Christmas into 2021.

Prayer

An excerpt from the prayer of St Patrick

I arise today, through God's strength to pilot me;

God's might to uphold me,

God's wisdom to guide me,

God's eye to look before me,

God's ear to hear me,

God's word to speak for me,

God's hand to guard me,

God's way to lie before me,

God's shield to protect me,

God's hosts to save me

Amen.

Response

Christians can be leaders in hope for their communities and encouragers of others through the hope they have gained by believing in the promises of Jesus.

As the year draws to a close, take some time to reflect on what 2020 has looked like for you. Where have you seen God at work? Which people have been your 'calvary' this year?

Looking ahead to 2021, what good and positive things could you begin to plan for? Who are you looking forward to seeing?

Revd Dr Mark Betson, National Rural Officer for the Church of England