

If you watched my sermon from a couple of weeks ago on Advent 2, you'll have heard me talking about creative tensions, which is something of a theme in the advent season. The fact that sometimes things can't be reduced to either/ or, that they need to be held together. The cooks amongst you will know that in the kitchen sometimes we try and prepare a dish which is both sweet and sour. Churches often use a hymn book, hymns, ancient, and modern holding together the best of the old and the best of the new.

In fact, as Episcopalians, we should be good at this because we are part of a tradition that aims to hold together the best of what's Catholic and Protestant. And there are two great advent themes in our reading today that also need to be held together. According to our readings, you can't have one without the other, even though they might at first sight appear to be opposites.

I'm talking about the twin themes of hope and judgment, the sweet and sour of the advent season. Advent invites us to look at both together and not choose one over the other. Hope and judgment belong in a creative tension. I want to look at them in turn, and I'll start with hope. Hope features in both of our readings, and hope is a strand that's woven throughout the whole of the Bible. Isaiah expresses that hope in terms of anticipating the day when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid. "On that day," the prophet says, "the dwelling of the Messiah shall be glorious."

And the message of John the Baptist in our gospel reading was that the promised kingdom has come near. The time has come to prepare the way for the long-promised Messiah, someone who was much more powerful than he was. So, Paul writes, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy in peace and believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." The Bible is very clear that we have sure grounds for hope. There is more to this world than meets the eye. Our world has been created by a God who will one day act decisively to establish a new kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace. Our hope is not in this world. A better day is coming. As St. Paul says, "The night is nearly over, the day is almost here."

My favorite Biblical image of hope is from the Old Testament, the story of Noah. You'll know the story. He was adrift in his arc with the various family members and lots of animals for many, many weeks. Eventually the rains stopped, but still there was water everywhere and nothing else to be seen. So, Noah sent out a raven, and the raven flew around, came back to him empty-beaked. Then sometime later he sent out a dove, and the dove came back with an olive branch. Then Noah was filled with hope. He saw that olive branch as a sign of hope. He could see nothing but water, but clearly the dove had found somewhere to pluck the branch. Noah knew then that there was land visible somewhere.

We too are given olive branches, signs that there's more to life than meets the eye, more than we can see. And those branches are our little signs of hope. I'm sure many of you have seen that wonderful film, *The Shawshank Redemption*. And the main theme of the film is the relationship between two inmates in a prison. They're very different. One has been in prison for years and has been ground down and institutionalized and doesn't want to think of trying to escape or imagining a life beyond the walls. The other is a younger, more innocent character, one who is full of hope and dreams of life outside the prison walls. This brings the following response from his older friend who says, "Hope is a dangerous thing. It makes men go insane; it makes them think that there's life beyond these walls."

In other words, hope causes us to be dissatisfied by encouraging us to imagine something different. Advent is a time to hope, to stir up a holy dissatisfaction with how things are. It's a time to remember the coming kingdom, to remember that things won't always be the way they are now, that God will have the last word when on that glorious day He restores His kingdom. I'll leave my last word on hope to Albert Einstein. He said that it's good to have hope to complement the realm of science. Science he says, describes how things are whilst religion tells us how things should be or will be.

Let me now turn to the twin theme of judgment, which comes across strongly in our readings. It runs alongside that theme of hope. So, in Isaiah, "The promised Messiah will," says the prophet, "not judge

by what his eyes see, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." Judgment seems to be an essential element in the establishing of God's new kingdom. Of course, it's John the Baptist who comes up with the most colorful language. He says of the coming Messiah that "His winnowing fork is in His hand", and that "He will clean the threshing floor and will gather the wheat into the granary, whilst the chaff, he will burn with unquenchable fire."

It's such talk of separation, which offends our modern sensibilities. We live in a culture that doesn't like to separate. To separate is to judge. We'd much rather be inclusive. How can a God of love, we wonder, be involved in any kind of judgment? Well, I heard a story recently that provided a partial answer. I can't remember the details, but I'm sure it came from the south somewhere. A young man was pulled from a river by an older man. And several years later, the young man, who'd been pulled from the river, murdered his partner. And was up in court, and he was very pleased to see the judge because he recognized the judge as the man who'd pulled him out of the river. But his pleasure disappeared when the judge imprisoned him to life imprisonment. On the way out of court, he said to the judge, "How can you do that? Why save my life only to condemn me to die in jail?" The judge said, "Once I came to you as a savior, now I stand before you as judge."

We remember we are holding onto this tough talk of judgment in the advent context of hope. Judgment is part of that hope. We're to hold judgment and hope together. The Bible assures us that God does not act or judge capriciously, He doesn't execute random judgments. His judgment will establish peace and righteousness and justice of the earth. He will act to right all wrongs. The British theologian, Tom Wright, says this, "Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human race. If there is no justice, then deep within ourselves we know that something is out of joint. Justice is hard to define and harder still to put into practice, but that has never stopped human beings and societies seeking it, praying for it, and working to find ways of doing it better. And justice doesn't simply mean punishing wickedness, though that is regularly involved. It means bringing the world back into balance."

We all recognize the world is out of balance, that something is not right. Central to the Jewish and Christian traditions is the belief that this passionate longing for justice comes from God himself. We believe that God will, at some point, establish His justice over all the earth. The world will one day be balanced again.

We're all bombarded with images and stories of suffering from all over the world. It's unrelenting. Every day, there are new and terrible stories to tell. And, of course, we're aware that we hear only a tiny fraction of the world's sadness. We might be led to think that suffering in the world is so tragic, so unrelenting that life itself is rendered meaningless. Plenty of people have reached that conclusion. And I can understand such of you. What keeps me from descending into despair and hopelessness is the firm belief that the sufferings of this world, from the refugees in Syria, to the homeless in Kentucky, to the sadnesses in my own life, do not go unnoticed. God sees and will one day act to redeem what has been lost.

Suffering would render the world futile if it were the last word, but it isn't. There will be a day when justice is done, when the world will be redeemed. On that day, things will be put right, God will wipe away all tears, as it says in Revelation. So, we can't jettison judgment. It's part of our advent hope. Judgment and hope, two themes that are inextricably intertwined. We're to hold them together in creative tension in this advent season, and for always. Amen.