

To us a hope - Isaiah 9:2-7

Our first reading this morning came from the book of Isaiah, written about seven hundred years before Jesus was born. Before the name 'Jesus' was known. But even way back then, the promises of God were known. Isaiah was so confident of those promises that he wrote as if he were witnessing those things happening: that the "people walking in darkness have seen a great light", and that "on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." (9:2).

Isaiah writes of the victory of God, the triumph of God, and the people's rejoicing. He says to God "You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy", and notes that the people rejoice before God.

Great stuff. Then we come to verse 6, when Isaiah tells us how those things will come about – and they will come about through a person. Verse 6, that famous verse, which so many people know so well from the words of Handel's Oratorio, The Messiah:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

In Handel's Messiah, that chorus is exciting: The voices in the choir share the good news with each other. The sopranos announce it, then the tenors repeat it, and then the altos echo it. The good news about the child born to us gets tossed back and forth between the various sections of the choir as the excitement builds, until the crescendo is reached with the titles of the child who is the Messiah: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

As Isaiah wrote this book, Israel was going through a dark time. The northern kingdom had been conquered by Assyria. Many of the people of Israel had been deported. It was a dark time indeed for the nation of Israel.

But into that darkness, the prophet Isaiah brought a message of hope, a message of promise. A great light appears to people walking in darkness – which is exactly what people walking in darkness need. We might not be living in Isaiah's time, but I think we know dark times too – we might not have been invaded or deported, but we live with fear. We live in a world where countries are invaded. A world where hundreds of thousands of people are displaced. There is poverty and injustice experienced by

millions. So many people are living in spiritual darkness – they have, it seems, no hope. Things are bad – just as they were in Isaiah’s time, and just as they were at the time of Jesus’ birth. But there is hope: God has never abandoned his people, no matter what they have done – sometimes there have been consequences to what people have done, but God has not deserted them. And here, Isaiah tells us that God is going to act. Not that he might act, but that he will act: He will send the Messiah into the world to rescue all people.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. That child born in Bethlehem two thousand odd years ago was born to us. Not just to the people of his time. Not just to the people of Isaiah’s time. But to all people – all the generations past, and all those to come, and to all of us today: To us a son is given.

In Jesus, God has given us his son. The promise of God – the hope of God, is available to all people.

But the child that is given by God to us is not simply a helpless child laying in a manger.

Isaiah tells us four titles that Lord God will give to this child. Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

We’re used to different titles for Jesus – Christ or Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, Saviour, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But Isaiah uses titles that aren’t used elsewhere.

The first title that Isaiah gives is ‘wonderful counsellor’.

Counsellors listen to people express their fears, misgivings and needs. Counsellors discuss various courses of action with their clients. Counsellors give good advice. Counsellors encourage and help their clients to make their own decisions. Jesus is the Wonderful Counsellor. He knows the needs of every individual. He is aware of all the problems in people’s lives. He knows the fears, troubles, disappointments experienced by people.

The second title that Isaiah gives Jesus is ‘Mighty God’. He is the true God with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And yet he sets aside the power and glory that belong to him. He takes on the form of a human being – a human baby. He is born in humble circumstances; he leads life in obedience to God’s will; he suffers and dies on the cross; he rises from the dead and gives eternal life to all who turn to him.

Perhaps people might expect to hear the might of God in a big booming voice and in thunder, to see God in the fire and brimstone of judgment. But we can see God in that child born in Bethlehem – that child, Jesus, is the Son of God, he is the Saviour of the world.

We heard here in church a couple of weeks ago how John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one to come – and Jesus responded “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” (Matt 11:4-5) All of those things are beyond human ability... those things show that Jesus is indeed mighty God.

The third title that Isaiah gives is Everlasting Father – which seems a bit odd because at Christmas we focus on Jesus as a baby, and we know Jesus as God the Son. But in the Book of Revelation we read of John’s vision of Jesus: Jesus says: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Revelation 22:13) Jesus always was. The world and the universe has its origin in Jesus. In the Gospel John tells us “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” (John 1:3)

The last title that Isaiah gives here is ‘Prince of Peace’.

Jesus came into the world to establish peace. Not simply peace among people, but between God and all the people who had turned away from God. Jesus didn’t do it by making people turn back to him, or by punishing wrongdoers, or magically intervening in our affairs. Instead, he gave himself up for us, by his death on the cross. And because of all that Jesus did for us, we now can have peace, true peace, everlasting peace with God.

Peace on earth. Goodwill to all people. Immanuel. God with us.

Christmas is a busy time. There has been the constant rush of Christmas parties, end of year activities, and shopping... then the rush to open presents... and then all the complexities of preparing Christmas meals, or the hassles of travelling – whether across the city or further afield – Christmas is often anything but peaceful.

And that’s just in our own lives, we can look across the world and see it is so often anything but peaceful. We have conflicts across the world. Just imagine how far away peace must seem to those in Ukraine. Peace in that region doesn’t seem possible.

Of course, people try to solve these problems - and we should try too – and we often get the idea that through effort and hard work and goodwill, the world can be put right. It's a noble idea, but it's something that I think history teaches us is not possible. People will always find things to fight about, there will always be misfortune, and there will always be suffering. And I think the ultimate cause of all those problems is that we – all people – have turned away from God.

But although we can't solve all the problems ourselves, because of what God has done for us, because of that first Christmas in Bethlehem, we don't need to. Because God will ultimately solve all those problems.

That's the heart of the Christmas message: Peace on earth. Goodwill to all people. Immanuel. God with us.

We hear the message every year, but we can get so used to it that we don't properly appreciate what it means for us. And we can be distracted by all the other things of Christmas, but it's wonderful to be able to gather with Christians here and elsewhere and hear again, or maybe hear anew, the message of God's love to us in Jesus.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In Jesus, this child born in a stable in Bethlehem, to us, a hope is given.

As we sang last night in that great carol: Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

That is our hope; and it is God's promise. The hope and the promise for each of us, and for all of us together.

Amen