

Trinity College, Cambridge
Evensong, 27th April 2008
Zechariah 8, 1-13 and Revelation 21: 22 – 22: 5

The Right Reverend Lord Harries of Pentregarth

What, I wonder, is the most dynamic idea that has ever emerged in human history? One that has decisively influenced both politics and religion?

In answer to that I would point to those half-dozen or so individuals who lived from 8 - 6 centuries before Christ, of whom Zechariah, of tonight's first lesson, was one. What these individuals believed was that life could and should be radically changed for the better. They had a vision of a very different world from the one we too easily resign ourselves to now. Listen again to Zechariah. The context can be stated very briefly. The people of Israel had been carried away into exile in Babylon. About 520 BC they were allowed to return to Jerusalem, where they started to rebuild the temple. But it was difficult, insecure work, and they got very downhearted. So Zechariah recounts what he believes to be a message from God, that the future will be one of peace and prosperity.

“Once again old men and women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each leaning on a stick because of great age; and the streets of the city will be full of boys and girls at play... Courage! Do not lose heart.”

In Western history that hope has taken many forms – the recurring millenarian movements of the Middle Ages and of many Christians in the United States today, who believe God himself is about to usher in that new world; literary utopias from Thomas More onwards; the progressive reformers of the 19th century who believed that political and social legislation could gradually bring

that world nearer; Marxism which for about 70 years was such a powerful and force in our lives and which has been well described as a Jewish heresy.

At the same time as these political expressions of the prophetic vision, there has been a very different interpretation of it. In the year 1129 a priest called Philip from the Diocese of Lincoln set off on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On his way he stopped off at Clairvaux and shortly afterwards the Bishop of Lincoln received a letter from the Abbot of Clairvaux saying that Philip has arrived quickly and safely at his destination and that he intended to remain there permanently. As the letter said “He has entered the holy city and has chosen his heritage... he is no longer an inquisitive onlooker but a devout inhabitant and an enrolled citizen of Jerusalem. But this Jerusalem”, he continued “is Clairvaux. She is the Jerusalem united to the one in heaven by a wholehearted devotion, by conformational life, and by a certain spiritual affinity.” In short, the prophetic hope had become deterritorialized and spiritualized. The hope for a transformed earthly existence had become a hope for heaven, whose realm we enter through the unceasing prayer and worship of a religious community.

This is a view that can be found in the New Testament, and it had wonderful expression in tonight’s second reading. This described a city without any religious buildings, without even the sun and moon “for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the lamb.” Down the centre of the city runs the river of the water of life and “on either side of the river stood a tree of life, which yields twelve crops of fruit, one for each month of the year. The leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations.” This is no ordinary city, and not one we can easily recognize as existing on earth. It is of course this hope that has dominated so much of Christian thought. Karl Marx did not despise it, but he did think it was misplaced. He thought we should be aligning ourselves not with a hope for heaven, but with a movement in history that would lead inexorably to a radically different world in the here and now.

In sharp contrast to all those hopes, political, religious and literary, there have been those who have dismissed them all as wishful thinking. Camus put it with blunt simplicity: “Let us think clearly and not hope any more.”

The present time is not one characterized by great hope. At best it stays just this side of cynicism and bitterness. Certainly there is a marked contrast with this month 40 years ago. It is difficult for those who did not live through 1968 to imagine the atmosphere of heady optimism that prevailed then. I was a university chaplain. It was in fact the younger academics rather than the students who were caught up in it, and our Professor of Maths went off to Paris to man the barricades. I remember a flame-haired Paul Johnson, now a right-wing polemicist, arriving at our local church hall to address the assembled gathering on the glories of the Chinese cultural revolution. Very different days.

So what is it to be? Should we, like Camus, seek to think clearly and not hope any more? That is an honourable position but not one, I think, that is open to a Christian to take. But if we are to have hope, in what is our hope to be grounded? And for what are we to hope: a transformed earth, or a new earth beyond our space and time?

Central to the message of Jesus is his proclamation about the Kingdom of God. There is a great longing that runs all through the Hebrew scriptures that God would decisively intervene in human life to right all that is wrong and establish his just and generous rule. Jesus made this hope his own. According to Mark’s Gospel Jesus began his ministry by saying, “Repent”, *metanoiete*, that is, turn your mind round, change your whole outlook, “for the Kingdom of God” that is, the rule of God of in human affairs, “is here”. As a sign that this radically different world was here, he pointed to the way people were being healed, and evil spirits cast out. After his resurrection his disciples believed that in this new

realm, which Jesus had established among us, even death had been overcome. They did not believe that this kingdom yet existed on earth in its fullness, its consummation lay in the future. But it was not a question of sitting back and waiting for that future. There were signs, even now, of that new world. Through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, people's lives could be changed; a new type of community characterised by mutual love had come into being and people were being healed in body and spirit.

There was a wonderful sign of that this week in the life of Billy Moore, the only self-confessed murderer released after nearly 17 years and 15 stays of execution from death row. In prison he managed to discover the names and addresses of some of the family of the man he had killed. He wrote to them to ask for forgiveness. They not only wrote back to say they forgave him but continued to write, urging him to use his experience to help others. He started a Bible study group and encouraged fellow inmates to treat each other decently. When Billy Moore had lost his last appeal and was faced with his final execution date, five members of his victim's family came to petition for his death sentence to be commuted. He was released, ordained as a Pentecostal Minister, and now spends his time campaigning against the death penalty. People can change, things can be different.

In short, Christian hope is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the presence with us of his Spirit; in the belief that through him things can be different, that even now there can be signs of the radically different world he ushered in and which will one day have its glorious consummation.

It is important to note that this belief is not just about an inner, or spiritual side of life, though it begins there. The Hebrew hope for the Kingdom of God concerned the transformation of the whole of existence, outward and well as inward, society as well as the individual, including its politics and economics.

To be a Christian is to so associate with Jesus and his indwelling Spirit, that things begin to be different; that lives start to be transformed and the conditions in which people live begin to change for the better.

So, finally, is this a hope for this world, or for the next? For earth or for heaven? Perhaps all we can say is that in allowing God to work through us for this life, we will discover a deep conviction that what he achieves is not lost, but is saved for ever as part of his eternal city. Towards the end of his first letter to the Corinthians there are some words of Paul that I have always found very encouraging. He wrote:

Therefore, my dear friends, stand firm and immovable, and work for the Lord always, work without limit, since you know that in the Lord your labour cannot be lost. (I Corinthians 15, 58)

What you do to make a difference is not in vain, as the old translation put it, cannot be lost. In letting God use you to build a better earthly city, he is at the same time building a heavenly one.

Ours is not a time of great ideologies; we are suspicious of all metanarratives, especially political ones. But there are many particular issues that desperately need our attention. There are innumerable concerns that will weigh upon any sensitive conscience – climate change, the environment, the devastating effect of AIDs, the oppression, conflict and poverty in so many parts of the world. We cannot focus on them all, but we can take at least one and make it our own, seeking in some way to make a difference; to be a sign of that rule of God in human affairs which Jesus proclaimed. May God enable each one of us to be such a sign; a sign of the possibility of a different, better world.