**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Sunday 17 February 2019 Epiphany 6**

**Readings for the Gathering**

**Hebrew Bible Jeremiah 17: 7-8**

**7**“Blessed is the one who trusts in God, whose confidence is in the divine.
**8**They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.
It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green.
It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

**Gospel Luke 6:17-23**

**17**He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, **18**who had come to hear him and to be healed…

**20**Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
**21**Blessed are you who hunger now for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
**22**Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you
    and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

**23**“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.

For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

**Contemporary reading from “Christian Hope”** https://www.taize.fr/en\_article343.html Letter from Taizé: 2003/3 Last updated: 27 July 2004

Another text of Saint Paul’s is even clearer. "Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). Far from being a simple wish for the future with no guarantee that it will come about, Christian hope is the presence of divine love in person, the Holy Spirit, a current of life that carries us to the ocean of the fullness of communion.

**How can we root our lives in Christian hope?**

Biblical and Christian hope does not mean living in the clouds, dreaming of a better life. It is not merely a projection of what we would like to be or do. It leads us to discover seeds of a new world already present today, because of the identity of our God, because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This hope is, in addition, a source of energy to live differently, not according to the values of a society based on the thirst for possession and competition.

In the Bible, the divine promise does not ask us to sit down and wait passively for it to come about, as if by magic. Before speaking to Abraham about the fullness of life offered to him, God says, "Leave your country and your home for the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). To enter into God’s promise, Abraham is called to make of his life a pilgrimage, to undergo a new beginning.

**Reflection for the Gathering**

I mentioned last week that one of our needs is to be around like minded people. On Friday I was in a group of people like that. We were gathered to mourn the loss of Rev Dr Judith McKinlay from the world. We here in this community are in the middle of mourning the loss of Margaret Megwyn from our world, so you will relate.

Judith was 81. Her life mirrored that of many women of her age. The first almost two thirds of her life followed her medical husband’s career including his volunteering in Asian missionary situations. However, Judith was inspired by her later work with Women’s Refuge in the 1980s to train for ordination. At the time it was with an expectation of chaplaincy work, but eventually she became an internationally known scholar in Hebrew and First Testament biblical studies. She was ordained straight into a lecturing position at what was then known as Knox Theological Hall and the following year became the only female church-appointed Professor in Presbyterian ministry training. The 1980s and 1990s were difficult times for feminists in the church and academy. Judith managed to be firm but gracious, feisty but also inclusive under sometimes extreme provocation.

She began this more theological part of her life when she was about to turn fifty. Many of us were gasping at the academically famous names on the email tributes which had flowed in. Her internationally recognised career as a biblical studies scholar specialising in feminist and postcolonialist work, happened in the last 30 years of her life. Perhaps we could call that transformation an example of hope.

I want to divert for a few minutes from hope in particular to a broader view of what the spiritual thing is all about. We humans focus on the detail – the divisions into denominations, the shape of our customs and rituals, the politics of church governance, but let’s take another step back from that. While the buildings and church systems of Christendom may absorb our attention and where people fit or not – feminist or not, inclusive or not, liberal, contemplative or fundamental or all three or not, there is a greater something behind all that.

I think of it as an aquifer underground running, through the millennia, underneath all our human history. This is the spiritual stream of life. It is the water alluded to in the Jeremiah reading, where spiritual people are compared to *a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit*. Unlike the aquifers of the Canterbury plains on our planet, this aquifer does not run dry, so trees with their roots deep into that stream survive all surface conditions.

Over the millennia, people have tapped into that stream. The founders particularly of different spiritual movements discover anew the refreshing qualities of the aquifer’s waters and the transformination it brings. Slowly,as others are attracted to that new life, communities, rules and edifices are built. They can be successful and relevant for a while especially if the connection to the aquifer is kept strong. Inevitably, however, someone’s building project becomes more important, or a particular way of doing things becomes the god of the moment and the connection is lost.

The aquifer meanwhile, flows on, rich and full and deep, transforming and refreshing where it flows and is tapped into. This is where hope lies, deep within us, deep underground, deep inside. For the aquifer does not flow physically under our feet but under our unconscious, material, lives. It is into this stream that our particular tree of life can grow its deep roots and connect to the Source of all being.

At this point of time we have a hope-filled opportunity. As the edifices and congregations and systems and structures of our organised churches decline and crumble around us, we have an early warning system right in front of us. If we hadn’t realised it before, hope is not to be found in a set of propositions or rules, but in the Source of All Being. We are being warned that it is time to stop depending on external sources for our refreshment and identity; that it is time to look within and discover that great archetypal stream of life can flow within our very selves. As we discover that, we will find resonances with familiar word and phrases, narrative and personalities in the ancient stories of scripture and in the lives of those very special people we know and love or whom we knew and loved. Not everything needs to be discarded, for some elements of our organised religion were nourished by living waters, they just got sidelined by more concrete proposals and ambitions. Even in the scary book of Revelation we find some important water imagery like in Revelation 22:1: *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb:* Same aquifer, just with imperial language suited for the times in which it was written.

One of the words which can be rehabilitated in this process of restoration is today’s word ‘Hope’.

One of the great three – love faith and hope, Hope can seem nebulous, wishy washy, wishful thinking. So hope has been bolstered over the years by the church into The Christian Hope and pinned quite definitely to the assurance of heaven waiting for those who are saved. “A sure and certain hope”... “the assurance of things not yet seen” ... ‘Hope in God’ is a common admonition. So hope has been made somewhat concrete – the expectation of a prize for good living and faithful obedience – a heavenly reward and escape from the difficulties of this world. Hope has also been made external in our theology. The God of the Apostles Creed is pictured as external and enthroned; in charge. It is this external deity, all powerful and almighty, who will save us. Along with this goes the concept that saving us is not our job but is done for us. It is predestined from before the worlds began. Hope is taken out of our hands and we become dependant, childish subjects of a grand chessmaster God. And some of us like that – all care and no responsibility! And too, hope, it seems to me, has been associated with our quite wrong assumptions that life will be fair for Christians – that if we live a good and charitable life, we will be rewarded, if not in this world then in the next. Hope, which we are assured we can believe in because we can believe in God, always seems to me to have been associated with getting better things than we have now – more friends, a more stimulating job, recognition, safety, success – whatever it is we are hoping for at the time.

I can’t stand here and tell you that the Christian hope means that the good will always prevail and the bad will always perish. That fact that this is a common cry in the First Testament particularly shows that didn’t happen then and it doesn’t happen now. The Gospel reading is actually only half of the original reading. The second part are the Woes as compared to the blessings:

*But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.25Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.26Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

Jesus himself here is credited with expecting that those who do not act justly will reap a negative reward for their unjust dealings, their lack of care for others, their lack of authenticity and their selfishness

The contemporary reading argues that *Christian hope is the presence of divine love in person, the Holy Spirit, a current of life that carries us to the ocean of the fullness of communion.* That phrase ‘current of life’, resonates with the image of the aquifer – a flow of life, a stream of spirit. This is what gives hope – not that external events will be brought into line to favour us – very difficult for post- Enlightenment people to believe. No, hope is that internally we are connected to what nourishes us, fulfills us and transforms us.

*Then*, whatever happens to us externally, we will be able to withstand anything – rejoicing when things go well, mourning when they do not. But, always centred and grounded deep inside because we are connected to the never ending Source of Life. The contemporary reading goes on to say *This hope is, in addition, a source of energy to live differently, not according to the values of a society based on the thirst for possession and competition.* Energy - the energy of the flow of water within that deep seated aquifer. Paying attention to our connection to the Source of Life, to the Aquifer of the Spirit is not time wasted navel gazing. For as the contemporary reading from the Taize community tells us, that connection enables us to live according to different values from those of the acquisitive, greedy, all- consuming world – instead living out values which emphasise, yes, those big three virtues; Love, Faith and Hope.

When we are connected to that Source of Life we can deal with whatever life confronts us with – an argumentative friend, a difficult job situation, violence we do not deserve. It does mean it will make us sit back and take it, but that we will have the energy to deal with it. Energised in such a way we can decide, because we feel secure within, to fight back, or reconcile, or leave, or refuse to cooperate, or blow the whistle. As the contemporary reading says, hope does not expect us to sit passively, letting the world flow over us, drowning us in its darkness. Hope does not condone a victim mentality or a martyr complex where we seek to manipulative and punish others in revenge.

Instead, Hope is about clear- eyed, confident living by people transformed by the waters of life. They know that through good or bad there is a living stream at the heart of them which will never end. As Canadian poet Mary Oliver puts it: *Coming to them*

*As only a river can–*

*Touching every life it meets–*

*That endlessly kind, that enduring.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

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1. From ‘River’ by Mary Oliver. https://www.poeticous.com/mary-oliver/river [↑](#footnote-ref-1)