

Sermon North Kent Welcome Service September 2020
Gill le Boutillier-Scott and Paul Chow Sing Lau

Isaiah 43: 1 – 4a

1 Peter 3: 8 – 17

Matthew 10: 26 - 31

It gives me great pleasure to offer some thoughts in this service as we welcome Gill and Paul.

In his book, *'Unapologetic'*¹ Francis Spufford writes that on Sundays he does something profoundly counter cultural because he takes his children to church. For him this feels right, as he is introducing them to the depth of God's love, they learn more about faith and belonging to the community that is the church.

Francis Spufford's book was written several years before lockdown but what he goes on to describe is a sense of exile, of being in retreat and at times isolated. Many of us may be able to relate to that experience, especially if we have been shielding during recent months. As we tentatively begin to reopen some of our premises, as we wonder about recent experiences, I wonder what we have learnt.

Perhaps we have learnt something about worship that goes beyond our church premises, virtual worship, worship at home, prayer and service in a wider community. Perhaps we have learnt something about our priorities, about hope and value for those we might have overlooked previously. Maybe we are going to do things differently because we now know all about 'Zoom'! Perhaps we noticed how creation breathed when we relaxed our frantic activity. Maybe we realised how weary we have become with church maintenance, keeping the show on the road to the degree that something in our personal relationship with God was becoming lost. I wonder how recent months have changed us.

This is the context in which we have begun a new Methodist year, the 1st September has come and gone and we are in a new phase. As we recognise the challenges and opportunities of this time it seems to me that the poetry of Isaiah 43 is essential to hold close to our hearts, for it is from these words that all our ministry flows.

*'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name; you are mine', and later, 'you are precious and honoured in my sight, and... I love you'*²

In this ancient book, written six centuries before Christ, the people are reminded of the heart of their faith and why they believe it. However devastating life might be, however oppressed and battered they feel, whatever their sense of lost identity, God is still there. God walks with them in the dark places, in the difficult moments, through anxiety, sleepless nights and bereavement God will not leave them. God calls them out of exile to hope, to promise that life will change, that they are not forgotten.

¹ Francis Spufford, 2013 Faber and Faber Ltd.

² Isaiah 43: 2- 4 NIV translation

All these centuries later the passage speaks to us now, it reminds us that God is with us even when we feel like we are standing on shifting sand, when much feels uncertain, that nothing will separate us from God's grace.

We are precious, the apple of God's eye, the pearl in the oyster, our names written on the palm of God's hand. We are honoured, respected and most of all we are loved.

Whoever we are, whatever our past, whatever will come next, we are loved and we are called to love with the same depth of purpose.

Desmond Tutu writes of God's dream for us, a dream of fullness of life for every person. This is not the same as a plan, this is something more expansive, but there are possibilities out there for us, destiny and potential fulfilled.

We are called to a life that is full of God's possibilities, as individuals and also as the church, sometimes this feels like a risky business!

In the first letter of Peter, at verse 15, we heard his words about being ready to give an account of the hope that is in us and to do so with gentleness and respect. Just now these words seem speak profoundly – we are reminded to give an account of our hope even though the world feels troubled, when we are still fearful, when we are uncertain, when there are those who feel lost and those who ache for connection and to do so gently and with respect.

Just recently the rainbow symbol of hope has been all around us. We have placed our hope in those who work in the NHS, in schools, in public service, in supermarkets, in deliveries. Our Christian hope is in a God who stands with us in the midst of the marketplace, a God who is present at the hospital bed and in the school playground. God who carries us when we are unsure, God who helps us to discern the right path to follow when we just don't know. God who reaches out to us when we can barely discern a deeper presence because we feel lost.

We are persistently reminded not to be frightened. To always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is in us, to seek peace and pursue it, to do what is right and good. We wonder what the future will hold, we wonder about our churches, our ministry and how being so shaken will impact on what is to come in the future. Perhaps things will change, perhaps it is right that they do. May we remember at the beginning of this new year that we are precious to God, loved people who are called to give an account of the hope that is in us, as we continue to proclaim good news, in pulpits, church car parks or someplace distant on the internet.

Let us allow God's creative possibilities to flourish through us. This is my prayer.

Go gently,
be kind to yourself in changing times,
know you are loved,
proclaim love,
pray without ceasing,

live in hope. Amen

Helen Hollands