

Date: 27/1/2019
Occasion: Epiphany 4
Service: Eucharist at St Johns/CTK

**Readings: Nehemiah 8.1 – 3. 5 – 6, 8 – 10; 1 Corinthians 12.12 – 31a;
Luke 4.14 – 21**

Hope deferred; hope fulfilled

It seems ironic that the great and the good should fly by jet to assemble in an exclusive ski resort – Davos – to discuss global warming. I can't imagine how much carbon dioxide was produced just getting them there. Then of course there's the food that had to be brought in – I don't imagine for one moment they feasted on locally produced yogurt and cheese – the wine and all the creature comforts they undoubtedly deserve after a hard day running their respective countries, or in the case of Bono, telling them how to run their countries – presumably along similar lines to the way he manages his tax affairs.

But then there are many ironies involved in life. My current favourite – in this vegan January – is how, in substituting almond milk for cow's milk, thoughtful people are contributing to the drought in California. It goes like this: many, if not most of the almonds used in Alpro almond milk are grown in California and due to demand they are grown in increasing quantities. But – and here's the rub – almonds need lots of water to thrive in a state that has been suffering from chronic water shortages for years. Then of course, they have to be transported thousands of miles so some of us can help reduce greenhouse gases by not drinking cow's milk!

But just in case we're thinking, cow's milk it is, there is the problem that greenhouse gases are not just produced by engines – the methane that cattle emit makes a substantial and if you get close enough extremely smelly contribution to this problem. And we shouldn't forget that we are the only mammal that drinks milk past weaning.

What a nightmare! A nightmare is only partly eased by the smell of bacon cooking, the irony here being the fact that bacon, like coffee, always smells better than it tastes.

By now, in your position, I'd be wondering what this has to do with Nehemiah, Paul or the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, so let me try and explain.

Nehemiah recounts the reestablishment of the community of faith in Jerusalem after the return from exile in Babylon. This exile lasted about 70 years and was, quite simply, catastrophic for the Hebrew people. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all deal in great detail, in their different and distinct voices, with the consequences of this disaster. The sense of collapse, of fragmentation and disintegration cannot be exaggerated. The God whom they worshipped, present in the land He had given them and

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in the inner sanctum of the Jerusalem temple had been unable to help them avert this. To say that they were upset is like saying that David Attenborough is somewhat concerned for the future of the planet.

So the longing for return by most of the exiles was never going to be easy. And it wasn't, because it meant learning afresh about the ways of God. Their determination to cling to their central belief in the living God, the Lord of Hosts is nothing short of miraculous. And this tenacity is central to all the stories of return and here, according to Nehemiah, the rediscovery of the word of God in the Torah, the Bible is central. We see how the discovery and public recitation of the Scriptures was crucial to binding this disparate, demoralised people together. They must have thought – and almost certainly did think – that all their troubles were over.

Sadly they weren't. But what they did have was something to guide them, something to place at the centre of their lives that allowed them to make sense of the continuing and extremely complex problems of living as a community in an even more complex and dangerous world. And the memory of exile helped them as they were reshaped and renewed in their faithfulness to God.

Paul was an inheritor of this experience and in writing to the Church in Corinth he is clearly shaped by that inheritance, something for which he refuses – quite rightly – to apologise. It is important to note that in writing to the Corinthian Christians he is writing to a community made up of people from different classes – free men and women, slaves, rich and poor – who lived in a very cosmopolitan city. Here is a different sort of building out of fragments. Having realised early on that the Christian faith was not just available to those with a shared Jewish inheritance, Paul grapples head on with the influences of the many belief systems that the Corinthian Church brought to their experience of Jesus.

By commending to them something akin to the experience of those who gathered in Jerusalem around Nehemiah, Paul digs deeply into the written word of the scriptures. And this allows him to be confident in encouraging them to place their trust, their hope in the living Word of God – Jesus the Christ – while also giving him the confidence to encourage them – albeit gently – to bring their own insights into the life of the worshipping community.

What this means for us is that in reading this letter we are privileged to see a diverse community being formed in Christ's name and we should be encouraged to learn that they didn't always get it right. Because neither do we. Paul is calling God's people back from exile and his greatest

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insight was to realise that that call was not limited – it was for everyone. In this he differs profoundly from Nehemiah. But then he differs from Nehemiah in witnessing to Christ, whose ministry we see beginning in this morning's gospel reading. The congregation in the synagogue, through no fault of their own, see things as Nehemiah did and balk at the invitation to move beyond seeing God as somehow theirs.

If we relate this to our own experience, it's possible to see this encounter and rejection as warning us not to huddle behind our own desire for safety, or to use our faith as a way of avoiding difficult questions, rather than as giving us the confidence to face them head on. In other words, when Jesus tells them their hopes are fulfilled, he is of course speaking the truth. The deferred hope of the return from exile is indeed fulfilled in him, but not at the expense of entering thoughtfully into difficult questions of who we are and how we live responsibly and well.

There is an urgency to Paul's message which stems from his eagerness to share good news and his belief in the imminent return of the Lord in judgment. We cannot ignore this urgency, though for us it has to be concerned with the possibility of environmental catastrophe which adds so much to our sense that the world not as it should or could be.

Paul makes it clear that if we are to make a difference we have to work together as a body. In this sense, the Church can and should be a symbol and example of what working as a body looks like. That this is not yet a reality is cause for repentance; that by God's grace it could be a reality is cause for hope.

So by saying that in Jesus all our hopes are fulfilled, we are saying that in him we are able to meet the complexity of the world's challenges and our own difficulties with hope and thanksgiving.

It's for each individual to decide whether to drink almond or cow's milk. It is for all of us as God's Church to decide once and for all to show the world that we have a real hope in a living Lord, in whom all things are made new.