

A key word for Advent is hope. There are plenty of puns to be found for places called Hope. Bill Clinton made a big play on the word in his first presidential campaign, since he came from a town called Hope in Arkansas. And long before that in a village called Hope in Derbyshire, England, a keen gardener by the name of Fred Marsden had tried for 45 years to win the prize for the best kept garden in the village. Finally, when he was 89 years old, he won. When asked by a local reporter why he had kept at it for so long, he replied 'I've lived in Hope all my life.'

Our readings today are all about living in hope. There are lots of exhortations for us to rejoice, to sing aloud, and not to be afraid – except those who by the corrupt practices of their lives do have something to fear, in which case the appeal is: change your ways quickly while you still can.

But what is Christian hope? What are we called to be hopeful about? Well, Christian hope is not the same thing as blind optimism. Just before the dawn of the new age for South Africa after the dark years of Apartheid, Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, an expert on the country, said that he was not optimistic about the future of South Africa. But he was hopeful. He explained the difference. Optimism is the assumption that things are going to get better. Hope is more realistic and is based on the understanding that the road to the great future may prove to be costly, and there are no short cuts.

In our Christian life there can be no assumptions about how the future will turn out. Certainty is not something we are offered. Faith and conviction are very different than certainty. They do not give us an absolute guarantee, or some kind of insurance policy that protects us from failure, disappointment and hard times. We can all too easily forget that the risen and exalted Lord who calls us to follow him to the true life and peace and joy, was himself crucified on the way. Yet people, even Church people, still manage to complain in times of difficulty and sadness that God has somehow let them down, or even that their misfortunes are evidence that there is no God.

Christian hope involves looking at life realistically. What is, is what is. That is reality. And the hope that embraces reality is grounded in an understanding that God in Christ is there in the midst of it all, whatever our situation might be, good or bad. And whether we can actually feel it or not, God is there for

us, coming to our aid, giving us strength, rescuing us not necessarily *from* the difficulties and the suffering but certainly *through* them, which, if we can grasp this, may make a huge difference to our experience. But we, or others, may still ask, 'is this reality or deception?' We must all answer for ourselves. Such is the meaning of faith and of hope. There is a necessary gamble, a risk involved, and a choice. Is God, and a God who is with us, true? A question once pondered by the poet, John Betjamen:

'And is it true – this most tremendous tale of all, seen in stained glass window's hue, a baby in an ox's stall? The maker of the stars and sea, become a child on earth for me?'

And to paraphrase him just a little:

'And is it true, that God who became man in Palestine comes to you and me today in bread and wine?'

This is the heart of the truth that God is with us come what may. For those who accept it and know that the coming of Christ shows that God is with us totally, life has real meaning, purpose and above all, hope. Each new day involves the exciting and ever-growing realisation and experience that God really is at the centre of our lives, fully engaged with us where we are, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, loving and cherishing us till death us do part, and beyond. Do those words sound familiar? Well Jesus did describe the relationship between God and us as a marriage, the best of marriages. And God-with-us means that our difficulties and weaknesses are but growing pains on our journey of transformation into Christ-likeness, our full humanity.

Accepting this truth makes a huge difference to life, to our outlook, our worldview, our relationship with others. We will no longer talk about God as somewhere else. We will think and speak from the heart of God. We will start seeing the world, including its troubles, its sufferings, as God sees it and do what we can to make a difference, to change things for the better. We will accept that we are no longer simply recipients, but participants in the life and activity of God.

And St. Paul encourages us today: 'Rejoice! The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'