

Good morning everyone. Welcome. It is great to be here together today. This morning is the start of Advent - that season running up to Christmas. These are the weeks that since around the fourth century, people have celebrated as the lead up to Christmas. So while we might have some of our own family traditions, things that we have done for a few years or maybe a going back a generation or two, this is a tradition that goes back a long long way. It is a time when we celebrate the coming of Christ and it is also a time when we wait expectantly, for Jesus Christ to come again. I will pray.

*God of hope,
God of love and power
You are revealed to us in your Word,
in accounts of prophecy and fulfilment
that direct our attention to Jesus Christ.
Shine your light on us now as we listen to your Word for us
may we open our hearts to Jesus Christ
May we yearn for his coming in glory
and serve him with joy
Amen.*

Our reading this morning is from Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 10 to 16.

Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, "It is a waste without human beings or animals," in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD:

*"Give thanks to the LORD of hosts,
for the LORD is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!"*

For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: In this place that is waste, without human beings or animals, and in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks. In the towns of the hill country, of the Shephelah, and of the Negeb, in the land of Benjamin, the places around Jerusalem, and in the towns of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the LORD.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Looking over the top of the walls surrounding Jerusalem anyone could see the Babylonian army. Everyone knew they were there. They were surrounding the city, just like they had been yesterday and the day before that, and the month before that, just like they had been for the last year. Jerusalem was under siege.

No one could get in or out, no food could get in to the city. No food had come in for over a year.

Yes there was water to drink, but people cannot live on water alone.

The animals had been the first to go. Now there were not even any rats left in the city. The people in Jerusalem were being starved into submission.

King Nebuchadnezzar was in charge in Babylon and he was a ruthless leader. Ten years before he had conquered Jerusalem setting up a puppet ruler. Someone who would look like they were in charge, but in reality they would do exactly what he, King Nebuchadnezzar wanted. No more, no less. And that puppet ruler was King Zedekiah.

But King Zedekiah had not followed the plan. He had rebelled. And so the Babylonian army was back to teach them a lesson and to make them an example to any other country that might think of doing the same thing. They were there to destroy Jerusalem and the countryside. So Jerusalem was under siege.

These days my father tell stories of being in the Netherlands during the last winter of the war. But he never told them when I was a child, the memories were too recent and painful. People thought the war was going to end, but it didn't. Winter came and there was no food. People ate anything they could find including tulip bulbs. Furniture was used as fuel for heating. In that situation there were humanitarian air drops of food and supplies, although many people died of starvation, lots of lives were saved.

But in Jerusalem, what was happening was on purpose. They were surrounded and starved to the point where they would give up. And the situation looked hopeless. But this was not just a physical crisis.

It was a spiritual crisis as well.

The temple was about to be destroyed, everyone knew that was going to happen. That was what the Babylonians would do. And then the land was going to be taken

from them as well. Some of the people were already in exile. The temple and the land were the cornerstones that the people had to remind them of their covenant with God. They were going to be lost. How were they going to connect with God from now on.

What was going to happen to the promise that God had given Abraham. What was going to happen to them as a nation chosen by God.

The future looked bleak.

And there was a leadership crisis as well.

The leadership was not just and it was not righteous.

King Zedekiah is described as doing what was evil in the sight of God.

And King Nebuchadnezzar, who God was using to deliver judgment, well God had a few things in store for him as well.

Jeremiah, the prophet, well he was God's voice, but he could not do much. He was in Jerusalem, but King Zedekiah had put him in prison. So it was an incredibly desperate situation. As desperate as anyone can possibly imagine.

And into that place of despair and desperation God brought hope. Hope through a prophecy that he gave to Jeremiah.

The prophecy was that into the deserted streets, there would once again be laughter and gladness. People would get married once again, there would be joy, thanksgiving, singing. There would be celebrations in the future, things to look forward to.

This temple might be about to be burnt to the ground, but that would not end the relationship people had with God.

There would once more be a house of the Lord. And while the economy would have been in tatters, with living in a city under siege. That would not last forever. There would be more than enough in the future. People would give offerings to God, thanking him for his goodness, praising God for his steadfast love. God was going to fulfil his promises. There would be more in store for everyone. The messiah would come. Born to the house of David. The people of that day could look forward, trusting and hoping. God was going to bring God's justice and righteousness. They were going to flow through the land. Things might be looking bleak, but the best was yet to come.

Now our situation today in New Zealand is not as desperate as it was in those days in Jerusalem. But for many of us, there are things that do weigh on our hearts and our minds.

There are global issues. There are some places in the world where people do have it almost as tough as those people in Jerusalem under siege.

There are places where followers of Jesus are persecuted. There are places in the world where people are living in famine like conditions.

There are events that do concern us in places like Tibet, Syria, Israel and Palestine, the Congo and the Sudan. There are places where people are suffering, where things are happening that are not good, things that do weigh on our hearts and minds. Where God's justice and righteousness needs to reign.

Those are global issues, and then there are more local concerns as well in our community in our families, among people who we love and care for.

There are those who have had a tough year. There are people we know who have had difficulties. Where the things that they have hoped for, for themselves and for their families just have not happened. Where there have been grief, health

problems, family problems, financial concerns, and trouble finding work. Those are very real issues that can seem enormous.

And as well as those physical and emotional problems, problems you can touch. There are also those who have had a difficult year spiritually. It has seemed like God has been distant and we have had trouble connecting with God.

We long to see God, to feel God's justice and righteousness, for it to flow like a river through our land. For us to be able to drink from it, refreshing ourselves. But that is not what our life feels like.

And it is in all those situations that God wants to come and bring hope. And to say to us, yes it will happen. The best days are yet to come.

For us, here in this place in history we can do something that those people in Jerusalem could not do.

We can look backwards to Christmas. When Jesus came as a baby. When God broke into our world to bring hope. That is why I love things like our window displays, lights that flash at night time and Christmas carols. For me, they are reminders about Christmas about Jesus bringing light into our darkness.

And we know that Christmas was the time when God broke into our world. Where Jesus came as a baby, as part of God's plan of bringing justice, righteousness hope and salvation.

But we also know that was not the end of the story. Jesus came, he lived, he died for us. And we know that now Jesus is at the right hand side of God the Father. We know that. we can be confident of that.

And we also know that we can be made right with God because of what Jesus did, we can have eternal life. God is with us, God's Holy Spirit is in everyone who is a follower of Jesus.

We know all that, but we also know that things here on earth are still messy. God has not sorted them out yet. God's righteousness and justice does not flow through the land.

And that is something that we are waiting, expectantly, looking forward to when it will happen.

Yes, we are looking forward, to when Jesus will come again.

We can anticipate it, the world is groaning as it looks forward to it happening.

That will be when God will reign with justice and righteousness.

That will be when things are sorted out.

That will be when the perfect will come.

So in the next few weeks we will prepare for Christmas. We will listen to the carols, we will look at the decorations and we might visit the light displays.

As we look forward to Christmas, knowing it will happen. Counting down the days, maybe using an advent calendar.

Let us also look forward to when God will reign, to when God's kingdom will come and Gods will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

let us pray

Lord of Hope,
Dare I? Can I really hope?
From out of the darkness
I sense a dim light ahead,
the light of your coming into the world.

I so long for the time
when you are no longer hidden from me
and my deepest desire is
to trust in your warm voice I hear behind me,
guiding me along a hidden path I do not know.

Dry my tears,
heal my wounds
and help me
to wait for the dawning of the dim light ahead,
with a brighter vision
of healing and freedom.

Amen.