Advent Sunday 021212 Crieff MAP Launch etc

Luke 21: 25-36

We share this morning in a remarkable act of worship. What binds it together is the theme of hope. Almost everything is in there – the launch of your Mission Action Plan which expresses present and future hope for the disciples of Jesus Christ here in Crieff. There is the commissioning of Eucharistic Ministers for mission and service.

There is the dedication of this church – 25 years ago, the light of this church began to shine again into the darkness of the world. While I was in New Zealand last month, I met the Bishop of Christchurch, Victoria Matthews, and the Acting Dean of the Cathedral, Lynda Patterson. They too face buildings in ruins after the earthquake – but they are leading the church to transform ruin and despair into a Godly moment of hope in which something new and better can arise.

And of course there is Advent itself – the season of hope in which we proclaim the coming of Jesus. Today’s gospel reading speaks in the dark tones of the Advent season – yet proclaims a message of hope in the coming of the Saviour.

You have used one quotation from TS Eliot on the Order of Service – here is another**. ‘We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.’** TS Eliot Little Gidding. The word ‘transformation’ begins Mark 2 of the Nine Marks of Mission – transformed lives and communities through receiving the Good News of Jesus Christ. Transformation means that we are the same people in the same place at the same time – but we are changed. Changed in how we see the world – changed in our faith – changed in our hope. And that means that we do ‘arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.’ We are the church – we are ‘as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be’. Yet the journey of discipleship which undertake together is one in which we seek to understand in mind and even more in heart the deepest truths about life and humanity – arriving where we started and knowing it for the first time.

Hope is fragile. It is particularly fragile in a world where there is much cynicism and pessimism. The Leveson Enquiry shone a light on a media culture which was abusive, disrespectful, careless of the dignity and privacy of people powerless to protect themselves. The economic news is unrelentingly gloomy. In Syria, Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan … grinding conflicts defeat the best efforts to make peace. People of faith care deeply about all of that – care about people, about poverty and about peace. It’s all too easy to end up believing that the worst will always happen … that people cannot be trusted .. that power will always be abused.

But people of faith are also people of hope. From Moses to Martin Luther King, Jr., history is full of examples of those who, because they had been to the mountaintop, had peered into the promised land, and had heard and believed the promise of a better future, found the challenges of the present not only endurable, but hopeful."

What is important for us today is not just the Mission Action Plan. What matters is the process by which it came about and where it leads in the future. . We have found that this process is special – particularly the Workshop in which you shared on 20 June -people talking and listening – setting aside for a while the normal business of churches and vestries, the finances, the buildings and the administration. Letting that be so that a different kind of conversation can take place – a conversation which allows people to share something of why they are involved and what they hope for in the life of the church. We give each other little glimpses of promised lands – places of deep care and love, of mutual support, of Christian learning, of transformation. And out of those little glimpses arises hope.

It emerges fragile and tentative. It can be crushed by careless words and negativity – the voice that says, ‘We’ve seen all this before’ – the voice of experience which dampens down hope. Yet it is quietly enduring.

This is what we celebrate today – this Advent Sunday. We celebrate the dawn of hope in our lives in the promise of the coming of Jesus. We celebrate the dawn of hope for this congregation in the vision set out in the Mission Action Plan. We celebrate it in the commitments which have been made as part of it. We celebrate it as we reconnect with the hope of those who rebuilt this church against the odds – the hope that we and those who come after us would be here to keep it shining bright as a sign of God’s love in the world.