

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The Lord is our Righteousness

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

During the week I visited a friend of mine in Gawler, and at one point we were out in his yard, and he showed me an old pomegranate bush. Quite a few months ago he had cut it down and drilled and poisoned what was left of the stump. Despite all that this thing was growing again, and even had some fruit on the still small new shoot. It should have been dead and long-gone from the garden, but here it was growing and vibrant.

I think we can all appreciate how difficult it would be to believe that a dead stump could ever grow again, but as Christians, we also know what it means to live in hope. This is what our reading today from Jeremiah is all about. God repeats a promise also given through the prophet Isaiah and already said earlier in Jeremiah. The good news of God for the people of Israel is found in the hope of a new shoot arising from the dead stump. God declares that he will fulfil his promises. But unlike the natural process of a seemingly dead plant growing again, this new and righteous branch in the house of David is the very work of God. This miraculous regrowth will be a sign of God's favour. And the hope of this day coming is what sustains God's people in the meantime.

God's people held on to this hope as they experienced great loss. Jeremiah prophesied in the time of the exile to Babylon. The people of Israel had seen invading armies and the end of their usual way of life. Their sense of freedom and security has been violated. They have no idea if they will live to see their homelands again. And this inevitably leads to some tough questions: Where is God in the midst of this? Why did such devastation happen? Is God present with them in exile? Will God ever allow them to return home again? What happened to the covenant God made with David? Did God's promises not actually mean anything?

These questions and the whole situation in Israel would surely have left many lost in feelings of hopelessness. And I imagine there are many today with much the same feelings. Not because of an invading army and a sense of abandonment by God, but from the many and various threats to our way of life, including this pandemic that's still carrying on. We too might be asking, 'Where is God in the midst of this?'

Then today we begin this weird time of year where the church is supposed to be focusing on preparation and expectant waiting, but there are already Christmas celebrations around every corner. The season of Advent is usually pictured as one of waiting in the darkness for the light of Christ. It's a season in which we are caught in the tension between the joyful expectation of the Messiah and the harsh realities of life in this present world. But the joyous Christmas carols are already blaring in the shops, and the lights are going up everywhere already.

All of this doesn't quite fit with the intended focus of the church at this time of year. We're sitting looking at a dead stump knowing that God has promised life. And it is a strange thing to celebrate before that new life has truly come. But this is our whole life as Christians. We live in the unsettling tension between what is and what will be. We are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ. But we don't experience the fullness of that salvation until we go through death into eternal life. We are declared holy and righteous on account of Christ. But we don't experience the fullness of the sanctified life until the sinful flesh is put to death.

We know, however, that the promise has been made. And we know that the one who made the promise is faithful. Now as far as the promise made through the prophet Jeremiah, we who have the benefit of hindsight know that God fulfilled this in a slightly unexpected way. The nation of Israel didn't receive a new earthly king in the line of David who led the nation back to its former way of life. What eventually happened is that God sent them a new type of king. One who truly fulfilled the promises made concerning the Messiah. The descendant of David who would arrive and execute justice and righteousness in the land is the one for whom we wait in this advent season. The new branch that grows out of the dead stump is none other than Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. He did bring salvation and restoration, but not just to Judah and Jerusalem, but to the whole world.

God was faithful and is faithful. And with the fulfilment of God's promises comes a new name for the city of Jerusalem: "The Lord is our righteousness". And since God's salvation through Jesus was for the world, this title takes on a bigger meaning. For us, "the Lord is our righteousness" means everything. This is what makes all the difference in the world. We live in a time when doing the right thing is increasingly difficult, and often it's not at all clear what the right thing is. But our righteousness comes from the Lord.

In this season of preparation and expectant waiting, the promise of God's righteousness both convicts and makes new. Our focus is drawn to those things in our life that contribute to the darkness of this world. But also, to the new reality that grows out of confidence in God's righteousness. This season of Advent invites us to contemplate the gap between what is and what should be. Where necessary, we should confess our failures, confess our sins, confess our doubts and our fears. But in things, we should look in hope to the Lord. He alone is our true righteousness. He alone delivers us from the bondage of sin and death. He alone brings hope in the midst of despair. He alone can make light shine in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out. The waiting might last a long time, but the new growth will come, the new light will shine, the hopes will be fulfilled.

So in this time of waiting, may we hold on to the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. May we speak that word of hope into a world often filled with fear and uncertainty and even despair. And may we truly understand what it means to wait on God and to live in his righteousness alone. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.