

JEREMIAH 33:10-16
THE SOUNDS OF JOY AND GLADNESS

What are signs that worship is about to take place in this building on a Sunday morning? If you are in the building early, you'll see them! The front door of the building is open, in itself a clue that something is going on inside. The Choir is rehearsing the hymns and songs that we'll sing and music is being practised. The orders of service are at the front door and people are gathering in the vestibule and putting on name badges; they are here to welcome people. George is putting out glasses of water in various places, and is running the stair lift. Kids' Church leaders are setting up tables. The Catering Team is laying out the mugs and biscuits in Hall 2. The sound system and the PC are switched on, tested, and loaded up with material for the service. People start to gather, waiting in expectation that worship is about to begin; the choir sings, the bible is brought in, the minister appears and worship starts. All of these are signs that something is about to happen and if you wandered into the building through the open door at 10am on a Sunday and sat watching you would know that something is about to take place.

What are the signs of the changing seasons? What are signs that winter is on its way? The nights get darker earlier and the darkness lasts longer. The weather is supposed to change: it gets colder and there is snow, ice and frost. The leaves fall off the trees. Skeins of geese fly overhead, birds migrating south for the winter and they arrive on lochs around the Pentlands. From my study window, the sun comes up later in the morning and comes low over the Pentland hills and the point where it comes up, moves further and further to the south and later and later in the day. The gritters are out! We see these signs and know that the seasons are changing.

What are the signs of Christmas? The shops start to sell things such as cards, crackers, and artificial trees; mechanical Santas are singing carols to entertain the children while the adults try to shop. The Ferris wheel goes up in Princes Street Gardens, as do the market stalls, and the ice rink; there are street decorations in the city centre; the city advent service with the advent scene takes place in St Andrew's Square Gardens. Children begin to rehearse nativity plays in schools and churches and parents are asked to make costumes. People get edgy about doing Christmas shopping. I don't need to go on, do I? These are all signs in our culture that Christmas is coming. The season of Advent marks that sense of anticipation, looking forward to the time when we celebrate the coming of Jesus. We light the first candle today as sign that the season has started.

It is possible to trace in the Bible other signs of Christmas in a much deeper sense, signs that look forward to the coming of Jesus. There was a sense of expectation in some people in Israel; it would be mistake to imagine that it was very strong, that it was a burning sense in the whole nation. There were some, perhaps only a few people of faith, who still believed that God would send the Messiah and who were looking out for Him. That hope, faith, and expectation was stoked by the promises that God had made, pieces in the Old Testament that the prophets spoke. One of these pieces is in Jeremiah 33, where God gives the prophet a picture of what will happen and how Israel will be transformed when the Messiah comes. Jeremiah lived and worked in Jerusalem in the days before the city was destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar; he warned the people that things were going badly and that exile was a real possibility, as God judged His people for their sin. He was proved right in the end; but he gained a reputation for being a prophet of doom. However, there are some wonderful bright spots,

lights that stand out in the darkness, words of hope and restoration and chapter 33 is one such. There are two pictures: the first is of the city; the second is of the family tree.

1. The city: Jeremiah has already said about Jerusalem “*you are...*” (*Jeremiah 30:17*) and the start of our reading described it as place of desolation: there are no people, no animals; it is an empty, dead city, and no-one cares for it. It is not an attractive picture; the city and the people are abandoned by God because of their sin; this is what the city and its people had become because they had abandoned their faith, and drifted away from God. But there is a powerful contrast: if this is what city has become because of the sin of the people, here is what city will become once again by the grace of God. Jeremiah paints a very different picture: “*there will...*” (*Jeremiah 33:10f*) The sounds of normal life are back; the city has come alive again; the sounds of joy and gladness, of people are celebrating the good things of life, getting married are to be heard. More than that, the sounds of worship are back; there is praise in the Temple once again and the people are rejoicing in the goodness and endless love of God. Here is a city and a people transformed by the grace of God, by something that God has promised; the people are brought back to life.

The city would come back to life. Jerusalem would get its life and worship back in the days after exile, when the people came home. So there is a sense in which the picture comes true as it stands. But it also has another sense, as a picture of a people who have lost their way being given new life by God’s grace, a nation revived, light coming to the world. This is connected with the second picture; when the second picture happens, then this is what God will do across the world.

2. The family tree: “*In those...*” (*Jeremiah 33:15f*) Have you done any research into your family tree? Have you found any people who have had important jobs? Have you found any kings? I suspect not! We’ve done a little bit of research into our family trees and found lots of Lanarkshire and Fife miners back in our history. In Jeremiah, this is family tree going the other way. This is David’s family tree; David, the greatest ever king in Israel and yet to come from his family tree is this “*righteous branch*”, someone who will come to be a great King in David’s line and when this great King comes, salvation and security will be God’s gifts to His people. This king will be a quality king: “*He will...*” (*33:15*) He will be a quality person who will love what is right and just and will live and practise what is right and just. He will be a good man. In chapter 23 this king is given a new title: *The Lord our Righteousness* – He will be righteous and do what is right and good; He will heal His people and their relationship with god will be restored. Here in chapter 33 the city is given the same title; the people will belong to the King and will reflect not only His name, but His right and good living to world. The people will be like Him.

There is a real sense of hope attached to this little picture. Things have been bad, but they will be changed; they will be turned around and all that was bad about the past will be transformed; the city for which no-one cared will once again be at the centre of God’s plans of salvation. Where once there was desolation and sorrow, there will once again be prosperity and joy; where people had neglected worship, once again songs of thankfulness and worship will resound from the temple walls. It is a hope that is centred on the coming of One who will fulfil the promises, the righteous Branch, the Messiah and when that happens all of this transformation will take place and all of these hopes will be complete. You can understand why this was a day to which people in Israel looked forward in anticipation, a day when all of these hopes and promises would come true

and God would save His people. Hope is a precious quality and so easily bruised, even lost. We live in a world that seems to grind us down at times, and the struggle of life seems to knock hope out of our hearts. Yet, here is the most profound kind of hope: it comes from God and it centres on His promise to save and bless the world; it centres on Jesus who has come to save and who will one day come again, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

When Jesus came, these signs and pictures were completed. His coming was the climax of all these promises that God had made about the Messiah and salvation; Jesus came to be the God-appointed Messiah for His people, the Saviour of the world. This is the whole point of the parable of the tenants in Mark chapter 12: in the story of the tenants and the owner sending his servants and then his son to collect the rent, Jesus is telling His own story; He is the Son after a long line of servants sent by God to draw people back to the faith they had neglected. Some people saw this: the story of a man like Simeon, the old man who saw Jesus as baby, who rejoiced to have seen the Saviour; a man like Peter who after years with Jesus confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah; a woman like Mary who sat at Jesus' feet, listening to His teaching, her master and her Lord. Some refused to see: there were people angry at the story because they saw that Jesus told it against them, the religious leaders who refused to see Him as anything other than a trouble-maker.

What I have seen again, reflecting on Jeremiah 33, is the transformation that Jesus works in our world. There are lots of people in our world who think that no-one cares for them; a spirit of desolation grips their hearts, life is hopeless; Jesus shows us that we have a God who cares deeply for us and loves us endlessly, who knows us, loves us, and cares for us, who answers our prayers; that sense of being loved and cared for changes lives. We live in a world that is "me-centred", where often people think only of self and "what I need" – Jesus changes that; He challenges us to look upwards and outwards, to love God and love our neighbour and when we rise to that challenge, Jesus transforms our life and the way we live it. There are times when we are so aware of our faults and mistakes, and there are people living with an enormous load of guilt on their shoulders, weighing them down, it is debilitating at times; Jesus forgives sins and died that we might be forgiven, taking away our sin and guilt and we are changed. When we take seriously the values and standards by which Jesus lived His life, or the way in which He taught us to live – when we put these values into practice, we create a whole new kind of world, and a whole new way of living is opened up. What a transformation! The world, life is never the same again when we embrace Jesus as Saviour and Lord. The danger is that we take Him for granted! Let's not do that!

"Give thanks..." (33:11) God is at work in the world. He has not gone away, even if the world seems to be a desolate place; He is still at work in the world, even if it seems that darkness engulfs the earth at times. We light the candle as a sign that Christmas is coming; but also as a sign of something deeper, more profound. It is a sign that God has banished the darkness, that God has transformed the desolation and that there is joy, and gladness, that songs of worship and thanksgiving fill the earth. We rejoice that Jesus has come to the world. The candle is a sign that our celebrations of God's coming are about to begin. Here is our hope: Jesus changes things; Jesus changed the world for ever when He came; Jesus changes us forever when we open our hearts to Him. Pray for yourself, for people you know, for our community, for the world – that this hope will live in our hearts today.