

SERMON

Rev Helen Dearnley, Chaplain, HMP Stocken

Psalms 137 asks, how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? and reminds us to call only on the name of the Lord our God. Lord God, be with us now in these strange times as we explore your word for us. Amen.

When we read as Christians the passage from Zechariah, we hear echoes of Jesus coming into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday, of Holy Week and the hope of Christ's resurrection. The people Zechariah was speaking to were in dark and difficult times and were holding out for the hope that was to come.

Holding the hope has been a much used prison Chaplaincy tag line, it's easy to say, it flows off the tongue, it has a good ring to it, in lots of ways it sums up in three words a lot of what we do as prison Chaplains, we hold onto the hope on behalf of prisoners, their families, of prison staff and the wider community, the hope that people can and will change, that mistakes can be learnt from and new opportunities found, that broken relationships can be mended and love shared.

It is however a line I've not much reflected on until the recent challenges that Covid-19 has placed on all our lives.

It is 'a heavy burden' holding the hope has for all of us over the last few months been hard, whoever we are, wherever we are, our lives have been changed beyond all recognition as we stay home to stay safe, many of us have been separated from those whom we love, we've been unable to go and meet friends or family for a chat, or go to the gym, the pub, the cinema or indeed anywhere else! And while we have been a key worker, we stayed at home, we've experienced a different regime. Life has certainly 'paused' from what was normal and yet at the same time life has continued, hair still grows creating new lock down looks! schooling still happens, just differently. Cooking with Jamie Oliver has become a regular pastime, as has crafting with Kirsty Allsop. And who knew so much fun could be had turning a toilet roll into an owl. More seriously new lives have been born and many, many have known the grief of the death of a loved one. And so, we realise that holding onto the hope is not something that can be done in isolation. It is something most easily done with each other. There are times I am sure, all of us watching or listening to this service have over the last few weeks felt hopeless, and yet been lifted by the images of an army of volunteers making a difference in their communities. Sewing hospital scrubs has happened here in HMP Stocken and across the country, food has been delivered to those in need and prescriptions taken to those who are shielding. These are just some of the many jobs volunteers in the community have done to give hope to those who need it.

Hope is seen, as we have heard in the tireless working of the NHS staff, hope is there when supermarket shelves are filled and neighbours look after one another, hope is there when communities demonstrate Black Lives Matter, hope is there when prayers are offered.

Hope can come in unexpected places, in unexpected ways. In our Gospel reading the people of Israel who have been waiting in hope for centuries for the Messiah to come, suddenly have two contenders for the role: John the Baptist and Jesus. And yet when the people considered their merits John is deemed too austere with his rigorous fasting and Jesus who chose to meet with tax collectors and 'sinners' is seen as being too jolly.

Jesus says, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'.

For me, our Gospel reading speaks both of taking a pause, and finding rest with the knowledge that Jesus is with us if we want him to be, whoever we are, wherever we are. It also speaks of that deep and special hope that can be found when our burdens are shared with Jesus. When we offer all of ourselves, our good bits and our bad, we recognise the true hope of eternal life which Jesus offers all who turn to him.

My prayer this day is that we all take a moment to look beyond the walls of our homes, our rooms, our cells and that we glimpse something of the rest, hope and peace that Jesus brings and holds out to each one of us and that we continue to hold the hope for each other.

Amen.