

## **Work, hope and peace**

These are the three words which seemed to me to be part of the message of the readings today.

My family have come to accept that before Christmas, before going on holiday, and before visitors arrive I undertake, with their help if they are unlucky enough to be around, a spring clean. Some of you may recognise yourselves in this scenario to a greater or lesser degree.

I try unsuccessfully to keep on top of things, so I'm always aware of what needs doing, and that if I did it straight away it would only take a short time, but time and again it gets left until necessity drives me. Someone once described themselves as a lazy perfectionist and that certainly applies to me and housework. I like the house to look nice, especially if I have been away from it, but find it difficult to maintain. The family would agree that there is plenty of work on these occasions, there is always hope that it won't happen too frequently or that I might grow out of it, and peace when it is all over and we are sitting in a clean, tidy house.

Preparing for Christmas festivities and preparing spiritually for the coming of Christ, for me therefore have some similarities. So what about our spiritual clutter and dust and dirt? The Gospel reading reminds us that we have to take urgent action in that part of our lives, because we don't know when God will come visiting us. It is a nudge to help us recognise that we don't want things to stay as they are, and that whatever work needs to be done will be well worthwhile.

Isaiah was writing in the context of exile, of hoping for a better future for the people. But it is not just for his people he was hoping for a better future for, it was for all the world, to be a place where there is no more danger, but instead peace and plenty.

We hear in verses 3-5 of God judging righteously, how do we judge others? Do we listen to hearsay and gossip? Do we judge from our prejudices? We can only aspire to be as fair a judge as God, but we need to try, we need to have Christ in a firm position in our hearts to help our efforts in this direction.

Then there are the beautiful verses 6-9, which describe a time that possibly is a return to life as it was in creation, before the fall, when all is once again as it should be in God's plans. It is an idyllic scene, which hasn't happened yet, but this peace is something for us to work towards, because it is not just peace in the animal kingdom that this describes. All this gives us hope, just as it gave the people of Israel hope all those years ago.

Paul's letter to the Romans is written to a congregation he doesn't know, that he didn't help to form, and isn't in a crisis of some sort, so is more an exploration of the beliefs of Christianity.

In this passage he acknowledges the importance of scripture in our formation, he was a well-trained, knowledgeable Jew before he became a Christian. Our knowledge of scripture can inform our attitude to the present and the future. The more we know about what God has done in the past, the more hope and confidence we will have in what he will do in our lives now and in the future. Jesus came to love all, Jews and gentiles, rich and

poor, and this is the love we must work to emulate, to love each other as God loves us. We all know that this is not easy, we can't do it in our own strength, but we are called to try. Paul swaps Isaiah's animals for humans, and Jews and gentiles are brought together to live in peace and harmony. All is based on the work of the Messiah, who has fulfilled the promises to Israel in an unexpected way, so that the whole world may now glorify God for his mercy. He finishes this passage with a beautiful blessing.

Matthew also quotes Isaiah as John comes upon the scene. His message is one of repentance, of turning from sin. But repenting on its own is not enough, we have to show that we have changed by our behaviour. It is easy to say "sorry" to God, much harder to change. Jesus said to one woman "Go and sin no more", (John 8:11) how difficult is that? Thankfully we have a merciful God who knows the workings of our hearts, but we can't afford to rest on our laurels. So we have the work from this passage, that of repentance and change, but where is the hope and the peace? John doesn't strike me as a peaceful character! There is hope because the Messiah is coming to baptise with the Holy Spirit, and that Spirit will help us grow closer to God and fulfil his plan for us. There is the peace that comes from trying to live in God, however hard that might be, the peace that comes from repentance and turning from sin to God, the peace of coming home.

And so I finish by repeating those words of Paul: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit". Amen