

This is the church season of hope, which trains us to expect something different. Isaiah the prophet calls out to a lost people, to have courage, because something new is about to happen. In the desert, a voice cries out, as John the Baptist echoes Isaiah and all the prophets who say that Israel's God is promising to do something new. Near the Jordan river, in the parched and drought-stricken desert, the shoot of new hope breaks through the dry crust. And the psalm also expects something new – precisely because of ancient memories. High hopes, but there is also a plaintive cry: God, you acted in the past, do the same again!

A preacher has to be careful when talking to Australians about hope. Australians are a pragmatic lot. Probably the land has formed us with its switches between dry and wet, drought and floods. Pragmatic people learn not to expect too much, and are wary of disappointment.

There are failed hopes in church congregations. Once the church was an influential member of society but it is now on a downward slide; decades of work put into local congregations sees the plant withering on the vine. Our children and grandchildren, largely speaking, have no interest in the faith.

Add to that reports from India or Thailand or Burma or Africa or Iraq or Afghanistan, of woundings and deaths; and in our own city, from places of entertainment, come reports of alcohol inflamed violence.

*God, you acted in the past, what are you doing now?*

We don't much like talking about such disappointment. Perhaps it's the stoic in us that says we should not complain; keep a stiff upper lip and push the pain deep down. Is it a surprise, then, to hear disappointed voices in biblical texts? We might have thought that, because they are closer to the beginning, they would be free of such feelings. No. The very biblical voices that tell us of the God who makes promises, also tell of the experience of disappointment. Look at the world and its suffering. Is this reason to give up on God? In our time, many have taken that path, even those who sit on church pews. When God's promises seem to fail, what are we to think, and do, and feel and say? That is the situation behind the Second Letter of Peter.

The letter is written for the second generation of Christians. Chapter 3 tells us that the first generation of Christians have died, and the death of that first generation is leading others, not associated with the church, to scoff at them. They are mocking the Christians because it seems that they have made a major mistake. The first generation of Christians expected the new reign of God would arrive before they died: Jesus would return and set up his kingdom.

But that first generation is passing away, and the promised new heaven and earth has not appeared. To those looking on, and even to the congregation, it seems their hope has failed. The letter speaks to those whose hope is under attack.

And the letter will be a help to us. It is probably the last letter – or certainly one of the latest letters – included in the New Testament. It was written, as I have said, for the second generation of the church. It has been included in the New Testament to speak to the experience of later generations, like us.

In its opening verses the letter says it is written by Peter, Simon the fisherman, servant and apostle of Jesus Christ. In fact, that is highly unlikely. Although it was thought that Peter wrote this letter, it was most likely written in Peter's name by a second generation church writer. It was written 'in his name' and is meant to carry the weight of his authority.

We are against plagiarism. We object when someone has written in someone else's name. Remember Helen Demidenko and the scandal that erupted when she pretended to write as someone she was not?

Now Julie Bishop is under pressure because she had someone else write her chapter in a book – part of which was taken from someone else again. We have a clear view that those who write have copyright, and are responsible for what they have written.

The ancient view was quite different: it was legitimate to write in someone else's name, in the spirit of what that authoritative person from the past would now say to the contemporary reader. In effect, the opening of the letter comes with 'how to use notes': it says, read this as a letter from the Apostle. So the letter offers a later generation what the apostle would say about their situation.

First of all, this 'second letter' from Peter connects to the first letter of Peter. It makes clear

that the faith of the church comes from both the apostles, and from the prophets of Israel. This is not some cleverly invented myth. It comes from those apostles who were witnesses of Jesus himself, who belong to the long prophetic story of Israel. We are in the vicinity of promise and hope. The God who made promises to the prophets is the same God who met the apostles in Jesus Christ.

Then the writer of the letter says something quite remarkable. He offers a comment about Paul (3: 16). Not only does this letter speak with Peter's authority; it also claims to be in line with the Apostle Paul, who was given wisdom, and wrote it in his letters. Then the author goes on: *'There are some things in (Paul's letters) which are hard to understand'*. (3:16) Enough people now have difficulty with Paul; and obviously some people closer to him had difficulty with what he wrote! But, rather than giving up on him as many do now, this letter makes a case for taking what he says seriously – and warns the reader to be wary of those who twist his words and misinterpret them.

This matters.

The biblical hope, announced by prophets and Jesus Christ, points to the God who comes to change the world. Old things will be done away with, and a new world will be fashioned. As the psalmist says, *God will change the world; it will be so transformed that 'justice and peace will kiss, faithfulness will spring up from the ground and justice will look down from the sky'*. (Ps. 85: 10ff).

The letter is addressing a great danger, which still has a home in today's church.

Seeing the world with its continuing wars and suffering some give up on the world as God's interest; they give up hope for the world. Instead, they look to a *'heavenly hope'*, and become interested in a *spiritual* world beyond this one. So, they live resigned to a dismal and hurtful life, waiting to leave it, expecting that afterwards it will be much better, once they have shed this heavy body.

The Gnostics of the early centuries came up with the Greek idea that if a person could find the true wisdom, it would allow them to rise above their bodily concerns (even while they live) and they could escape *'spiritually'*. The modern version of that can be found in the phrase, *'mind over matter'*; it also explains why a western version of Buddhism is becoming so attractive – where the mind can be trained to rise above the hurt of the world, a person learns to be indifferent to change and chance. Here ancients and moderns join force as they place the solution in human hands alone.

But that is not the solution given in today's letter. It is too well schooled in prophetic faith – it expects more of God and more of the world. It looks to the God who has every time in hand, and knows every moment intimately.

The letter says: that *'with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day'*. This should not be taken to mean that that God is timeless, above all time, separated from time and place. It cannot mean that if we have been trained by the prophets and the apostles. Rather it speaks of the Lord who created the heavens and the earth and takes every moment seriously, but is not overwhelmed by the passage of time over millions of years!

This God is Lord of time.

Why then doesn't this God come to end the world's suffering, by breaking in and simply wiping it all away? As an answer the letter speaks of *patience. God's patience*. And it also asks those who are reading the letter to be patient, too.

Patience is a virtue. But it is easy to become impatient. We are living among that impatience.

First, there are people who want God to break in with the rapture. A friend recently sent me a web-site that has an index claiming to predict when the God will bring the end. Have they forgotten all the groups and movements who, in the past, have calculated the timing of the end and got it wrong?

Have they forgotten that disappointment when the day came, but the end did not?

There is a second sort of impatience. The impatience of leaders like Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot to name a few – perhaps we might add today names like bin Laden and Bush – the impatience where human leaders promised to bring a new age: a thousand year Reich, a new Soviet paradise, a time of unlimited capitalist wealth; it is the impatience that wipes out cities with a single bomb, and leads men and women to become suicide bombs. This impatience expects to bring the end with violence.

So utterly different from all that impatience, today's letter speaks of God's patience. A patience that is willing to wait, to persuade, to lure us toward something new. We see that deep and resilient patience in Jesus who entered our life; a suffering patience that longs for God's new day; he is the pattern of God's patience. He is the way the *'day of God'* will come.

The puzzling and comforting word here is: *God is willing to wait*; patiently seeking to turn our hearts and minds and lives to himself. This is One who will not force or compel. God is a persuader who opens up opportunities for us to trust in the

promise of the new heavens and earth.

What are we to do in the meantime? Each of us is to live patiently. Certainly, few – if any - of us will ever alter the great scheme of things; but we can take *into ourselves* the hope that 'justice and peace shall kiss'; we can learn how to live with integrity, In our own bodies we can learn to live in faithfulness toward others. Though we live in a society that is ever more forgetful of its biblical roots, each of us has the freedom to be shaped by God's patience in the way we live, day by day.

But do not think this means we can do nothing. Notice how young people have learnt to own and use mobile phones, computers and ipods. They have been introduced to a new world, and have been trained to live in it. We have the responsibility to assist them – and each other - to live with patience. And when faced with disappointment because violence and injustice seem to have the upper hand, to hear again of the God who is patiently working to change us - even to make all things new; who will not give up until that is complete.

For now, the main challenge is this: let yourself be convinced that no moment is out of God's hands, even the future.

Though there will be those who scoff, as the crowd did at the cross of Jesus, our calling is to be those who live as signs of God. So the letter says:

*Therefore beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. (3:14)*

That is to say, let nothing tarnish your hope!

May we be granted the same patience to entrust our lives to the God, for whom each moment is precious, and who has every millennium in hand.

To that God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory, now and forever. AMEN.