**Hope for the Future**

Isaiah 65:17-25

1. **Introduction**

* ***Living in a nightmare world***

**We are constantly reminded in our daily television news that we live in a broken and divided world. A number of images came to mind as I prepared this address. In the first place, there were the images in the past week of complete, utter and absolutely deadly devastation as a super typhoon named Haiyan swept through the Philippines, leaving an estimated 10,000 people dead in its wake in one city alone. In the second**

**place, there are the dreadful pictures still coming out of Syria which reveal the impact of the ongoing civil war on innocent people caught up in the fighting. 6.5 million people (or just fewer than 25% of the entire population) have been displaced from their homes and a further 2.8 million require humanitarian assistance. The UNICEF estimates that 2 million people have left the country seeking asylum principally in neighbouring Jordan. This makes our so called asylum seeker issues simply a drop in the proverbial bucket of human need. In the third**

**place, there were the images of the recent very early bushfires which have devastated parts of eastern Australia which have contained potent pictures of folk who have lost everything when creation explodes. If I remember my childhood poetry we do live in a land of droughts and flooding rains, but Dorothea McKellar could never have envisaged how human activity has and will continue to compound extremes in this dry brown land and so threaten human life into the future.**

* ***The need for a sustaining hope***

**Right across this planet many people are fearful and anxious about the future in many and varied contexts. We are not immune and are not insulated from these concerns. I now have five grandchildren and I wonder what sort of environment and society they will inherit from my generation. It is a legitimate for us to wonder and ask the question: *‘where is the world heading?’* Both creation and humanity are in desperate need of total renewal and transformation. This brings us to the heart of**

**our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 65. The last eleven chapters of the prophecy of Isaiah seem to deal with big picture issues rather than specific historical situations. However they probably allude to the period after God has rescued his people from exile in Babylon through Cyrus the Persian. Some of these returnees will forsake faith in God. Others will be disappointed with what eventuates because it does not meet all their expectations, but they will continue to pray (63:7-64:12) and hold onto the promises of God (65:1-66:24). In this**

**context, God articulates a compelling vision for the future for these faithful servants. This is a word for penitent people living among the ruins of their world, who are waiting for the final remedial acts of God in history. In our terms, verses 17-25 contain a word for all those who keep faithfully praying for the coming of God’s kingdom. It is a word for us to persist in faith in our creator, redeemer God who will work his purposes out. It is a word to continue to pray and wait in hope.**

**The question for us is whether this compelling vision of the future will sustain us in all the mess we still constantly see in the present.**

1. **A Compelling Vision**

**The story of the entire Bible is how paradise was lost and is restored. The Bible narrative begins and ends with a perfect creation. The rebellion and sin of the first humans against the rule of God (in which we have all willingly participated ever since) has wrought havoc in our relationship with God, in our relationships with each other in our families and communities and to the very environment in which we now live. As the Apostle Paul once said the creation itself is now in *bondage to***

***decay* (Romans 8:21). The original perfection is marred and spoiled. This is the reason that the loveliest and most beautiful scenes in nature are also the witness to bloody horrors. Floods, hurricanes, droughts, avalanches, earthquakes and tsunamis now stalk the earth because God has temporarily made the world a place suitable for rebels.**

**But he has always intended to do a new thing, to deal with sin and its effects decisively, to create a people for himself to be with him forever in his perfect place. Isaiah 65 addresses this new thing in at least three ways -**

* ***Poem of new creation (verses 17-18b)***

**The first part of the poem declares God’s intent regarding the entire creation:**

***17For I am about to create new heavens***

***and a new earth;***

***the former things shall not be remembered***

***or come to mind.***

***18But be glad and rejoice for ever***

***in what I am creating***

**The past decade has seen an explosion of lifestyle makeover TV shows. The classics in Australia have been *Backyard Blitz* and *Domestic Blitz*, but the phenomenon is ubiquitous in Western culture with audiences around the world being urged to 'renovate' everything from their personal shapes, their homes, their pets and children. The good news is that God is not interested in mere temporary improvements or patch-ups, but a total and permanent transformation of all things. These**

**verses describe divine action to renew the totality of existence. From the raw material of all we now see, God will work a miraculous transformation. Everything about**

**the old order will be gone in total renewal. It will be so new that we will all forget what used to be because of this tremendous saving, creative and redemptive act of God. Moreover there will be abounding and eternal joy in contrast to the uncertain, fleeting fickle joys of the here and now.**

* ***Poem of God’s city (verses 18c-20)***

**The second feature of the poem is about the new Jerusalem and its people:**

***for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,***

***and its people as a delight.***

***19I will rejoice in Jerusalem,***

***and delight in my people;***

**In the Bible Jerusalem is the city of God and its temple a symbol of God living among his people. The renewal of the total environment merges with the transformation of his city. There will be nothing in it which falls short of God’s desires for his people (notice the affectionate delight in the personal phrase *my* people). Life in God’s new reality will be all he meant it to be. In the first place, there will be nothing to cause sorrow (19b), no more *weeping* or *crying* because both the emotion and every cause of it has gone. In the second place,**

**there will be nothing that blights life (20a,d). Life to the full in this new place is described in terms of things we know and experience in the here and now. Hence the twin affirmation that no infant will**

**fail to enjoy life or elderly person come short of total fulfilment. Indeed one would be but a mere youth were one to die at 100 years old! In fact this text implies the power of death will be destroyed and sin will no longer be present.**

* ***Life in the new city and new world (verses 21-25)***

**The final five verses reflect on the essence of life in the new city and the new world. Isaiah uses pictures drawn from the colours of this life to describe the perfection of life to come. There are just three things I want to draw to your attention -**

**In the first place, the life to come is marked by *security* and *stability* (verses 21-22). Two positive statements (building and planting) are matched by two negative counterparts. There is no more building or work which is**

**vain, futile and pointless. Vineyards are chosen to illustrate this because they take a long time to cultivate and bring into production. In other words they require settled conditions. In this new reality**

**the workers are assured of the fruits of their labour. Moreover the picture for the life of God’s people is that of a tree, which is a potent image of durability and longevity.**

**In the second place, the life to come is marked by *personal* and *family fulfilment* (verse 23) –**

***They shall not labour in vain,***

***or bear children for calamity;***

***for they shall be offspring blessed by***

***the Lord—***

***and their descendants as well.***

**The thought moves to enjoyment of their work. In other words in the new creation drudgery is removed and all work is satisfying and rewarding. Moreover family life**

**will not be marred by tragedy. There is no darker cloud in the lives of any parents than when a beloved child predeceases them and their hopes for them are dashed. In the New Jerusalem, however, God’s people *shall be offspring* (literally ‘seed’) *blessed by the LORD* just as God promised to Abraham of old. Moreover their descendants will also experience and enjoy all God’s blessings.**

**In the third place, the life to come is marked by *peace with God* and *peace in the new creation* (verses 24-25). There will be a oneness and fellowship with God who will anticipate all our needs. He will be constantly watchful for our good (24a). Moreover there will be an identity of purpose in that while they are still speaking, God is hearing and acting. Finally, Eden is restored with**

**old enmities will be gone and fears removed (*the wolf and the lamb shall feed together*) and indeed natures will be changed (*the lion shall eat straw like the ox*). Moreover there is an obvious allusion to the reversal of Genesis 3 with the reference to the *serpent* whose food will now be dust! All damage and destruction is banished from creation for the whole place is *my holy mountain,* the place where the Lord in holiness dwells among his people, and they with him.**

**This is a comprehensive and compelling vision of the new age which will see the remedy of all that is unnatural in creation and human affairs. It is breathtaking in scope and repeated again in Scripture when these words of Isaiah are echoed by the Apostle John in the final vision of the end of the world in the Book of Revelation -**

***Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,***

***‘See, the home of God is among mortals.***

***He will dwell with them;***

***they will be his peoples,***

***and God himself will be with them,***

***4he will wipe every tear from their eyes.***

***Death will be no more;***

***mourning and crying and pain will be***

***no more,***

***for the first things have passed away.’***

1. **Conclusion**

* ***Is this just an impossible dream?***

**Is this just an impossible dream? There have been countless utopian schemes throughout history which have come to naught. What makes this one different? Is this word from the Lord reliable? The answer is yes. The reason is simple but**

**profound. Our hope is based on the coming of Jesus who ushered in the kingdom of God in his life, his ministry, his death on the cross and in particular his resurrection. It is this which is the guarantee of our future hope. The principle of resurrection, which is embedded in nature in every dead seed which becomes a beautiful flower, was demonstrated decisively in history when Jesus was raised from the dead. Further**

**this is the pledge of our ours if we belong to him by faith. He is the *first fruits* of a great resurrection harvest. When the whole church, living and departed, is finally redeemed, creation itself will be at last set free from *its bondage to decay.***

* ***What do we do in the here and now to realise God’s vision?***

**So what do we do in the here and now as we wait for the realisation of God’s vision? I want to suggest at least two things –**

**In the first place, like some of the people in Isaiah’s day, we must keep praying for the coming of God’s kingdom. This is what Jesus taught us to do and this is what we do every week when we gather as church. We pray –**

***Our Father in heaven,***

***hallowed be your name,***

***your kingdom come,***

***your will be done,***

***on earth as in heaven.***

**Regrettably we Anglicans sometimes rattle this prayer off mindlessly. We forget we are ultimately praying for the return of Jesus as saviour and judge. We forget we**

**are really praying for the marriage of heaven and earth and for the fulfilment of all God’s promises in the new age. Our first response must always be**

**to keep praying meaningfully and longingly this prayer.**

**In the second place, if we are praying in this way we will live in the present in the light of the future. This means we will put God’s interests first in our lives, relationships and ambitions (Matthew 6:33). It means that in the power of the**

**Spirit we will seek to live righteously in all our relationships now so that there might be glimpses of his kingdom here on earth in the here and now.**

**While we ourselves cannot renew creation nor humanity, we can certainly pray and work to usher in God’s final reality. Amen. Come Lord Jesus!**

**+Trevor Edwards**

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