

The Name of Hope

"In his name the nations will put their hope" (Mt 12:21)

A lawyer was driving his car. Thinking that nobody else would be on the road, he raced through a stop sign. Another driver, legitimately driving through the same intersection, had no time to react and the cars collided. Fortunately, neither driver was hurt. The lawyer, seeing that the other driver was suffering from shock, helped him from his battered car and offered him a drink from a flask he held in his hand. The other driver took a long swig and handed back to the lawyer. The driver was still shaking, so the lawyer offered him the flask again. He took another long swig. The lawyer then took the flask and put it away.

"Aren't you going to have a drink yourself?" asked the driver.

"Not now," answered the lawyer. "I'll have something after the police leave."

Why are there so many jokes against lawyers? One reason is that there is a popular perception that our legal system constantly fails to deliver justice. In NSW we used to have a Department of Justice. Now it's called the Department of Corrective Services. This says a lot. It may be unfair to say that our legal system is not concerned with justice, but it is pretty obvious from this change of name that the main priority of our legal system is no longer justice, but rehabilitation.

In Matthew 12 Matthew quotes a passage from Isaiah 42 which concerns the ideal king. This king is likened to King David. Like David he is chosen by God, greatly loved by God and endowed with God's Spirit. As a king his main priority is to ensure there is justice. So the quote states "*he will proclaim justice to the nations*" (v18b) and "*till he leads justice to victory*" (v20). Matthew tells us that this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah, God's chosen king, greatly loved by God and endowed with his Spirit to ensure there is justice. The quotation ends by saying, "*In his name the nations will put their hope.*" The reason that "the nations" or Gentiles/non-Jewish people will place their hope in King Jesus is because Jesus delivers justice.

These days the legal system and government are two separate entities. In the ancient world this was not the case. The king was the High Court, the final court of appeal, the ultimate judge, the one responsible for seeing that justice was done.

King Louis XV was a womanizer who left 18th century France in a financial mess. The French people despised this man who put his own pleasure before the needs of the people. The famous Hope Diamond, now located in the Smithsonian Institution, was once worn around his neck. But placing hope on such a faithless king as Louis XV was misguided. By contrast, our text speaks of a king who is so committed to just government that it says "*In his name the nations will put their hope.*" The hope of all peoples sparkles in dazzling fashion around the neck of King Jesus.

You are all familiar with Charles Schultz's Peanuts cartoon strip, featuring Charlie Brown. In one cartoon Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy remarks, "Yesterday I was a dog. Today I'm a dog. Tomorrow I'll probably still be a dog. Sigh! There's so little hope for advancement." We are committed to encouraging people to put their hope in Jesus because we are convinced that our King changes peoples' lives for ever, that, in his good time, there is a certain hope of advancement.

Why is placing hope in King Jesus so well grounded? Because he proclaims justice and leads justice to victory. The Greek word for "justice" is the word *krisis*, that's our word "crisis". In the Bible this word is not used to refer to just any kind of crisis, but to a particular crisis - the crisis of God's judgment. The quotation from Isaiah says about Jesus as this great Messianic King, "*He will proclaim justice ('crisis') to the nations*". That's exactly what Jesus does do in the surrounding context: he proclaims justice, that is, he preaches a message concerning the coming crisis, the judgment of God when perfect justice will be executed. It is Jesus who will lead justice to victory, who will ensure that the day will come when perfect justice will be delivered. That day is what we call the Day of Judgment, the day when you and I and everyone else will receive justice.

But there is irony in Matthew's use of Isaiah 42. This quotation says that in Jesus' name the nations, that is, non-Jewish peoples, will put their hope. For many of those who thought of themselves as being God's people the justice brought by their Messiah, the ideal king, is not the justice they wanted. Justice for many of the Jewish people, we are told, will be a terrible thing.

So in 10:15 Jesus warns those towns and villages that reject his disciples "*it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of krisis/judgment than for that town*". In Matthew 11 Jesus denounces cities in which his miracles were performed but which nevertheless did not repent (v20), saying "*it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of krisis/judgment than for you*" (11:22); and "*it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of krisis than for you*" (11:24). In Chapter 12 Jesus contends with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. He tells them "*that men will have to give account on the day of krisis/judgment for every careless word they have spoken*" (v36); that "*The men of Nineveh will stand up at the krisis with this generation and condemn it*" (v41) and that "*The Queen of the South will rise at the krisis with this generation and condemn it*" (v42).

On the day of crisis or judgment or, if you like, justice, God will treat people justly and, on that day, those who have not responded to Jesus will suffer terrible judgment, worse than that experienced by Sodom and Gomorrah; worse than that suffered by Tyre and Sidon. On that day of justice God will not let people get away with the careless words they have uttered, words with which they reject the clear evidence of God's Spirit at work amongst them. On the day of justice God will deal severely with those who have heard the preaching of the gospel and have not repented; he will judge severely all those who have failed to act upon the wisdom imparted by King Jesus.

Yet, you will notice, this day of crisis, of judgment, of justice is a day of great hope for those Gentiles who put their hope in Jesus. Jesus says "*the men of Nineveh will stand up at the krisis with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.*" This is a double-banger. On the one hand, it implies the Jewish people are in big trouble. Gentiles repented at the preaching of the lesser light, Jonah. But the Jews won't even repent when their Messiah proclaims justice to them. On the other hand, because one greater than Jonah is here we can also expect that there will be many Gentiles who will repent upon hearing the message preached by King Jesus. Jesus says, "*The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends*

of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom; and now one greater than Solomon is here." This too is a double-banger. On the one hand, it implies the Jewish people are in very hot water. A Gentile traveled an immense distance, by the standards of the ancient world, so eager was she to learn from the wisdom of Solomon. But the Jews wouldn't even listen to the wisdom of the Messiah, someone far greater and wiser than Solomon, when they didn't have to travel any distance at all. On the other hand, Jesus also implies that because he is greater than Solomon, there will be many other Gentiles who, like the Queen of South, will come to hear his wisdom. Truly, in his name non-Jewish people, people like you and me, will put their hope. Why? Because we know that because we acknowledge Jesus as our king, our Lord, we will be citizens in his kingdom, a realm in which we will experience perfect justice.

A judge once slipped a message to her clerk during a trial. The note said: "Blind on the right side. May be falling. Please call someone." The clerk rang a number and told the judge not to worry, help was on the way. Suddenly paramedics burst into the court room. "Why are they here?" asked the judge, puzzled. "Because you told me you are experiencing blindness and are about to collapse", replied the clerk. "No! That's not what I meant", explained the judge, pointing to one of the oddly hanging window blinds on the right side of the courtroom.

But we do say justice is blind and this certainly applies to the Jewish people of Jesus' day who had their own tunnel-vision ideas about what justice meant. They thought that Messianic justice meant forcibly removing the Roman armies and authorities from their land and having a powerful political ruler who would create an independent and peaceful political state. Jesus was not interested in being the kind of king they wanted, because he knew that this was not the way to fulfill his primary task of creating a just society. In Matthew's Gospel we see that Jesus' teaching clashes with the understanding of the Pharisees and teachers of the law that a just society involved people submitting to their interpretation of Old Testament laws.

Look, for example, at the two incidents that immediately precede this identification of Jesus with the ideal Davidic king of Isaiah 42. Matthew 12 begins with Jesus' hungry disciples eating ears of corn on the Sabbath as they were walking through cornfields. The Pharisees protest that this is not lawful. Jesus rebukes them for not understanding what it means to observe the Sabbath and comments, "*If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice', you would not have condemned the innocent*" (v8). Immediately, after this Jesus shows that on the Sabbath mercy takes precedence over any idea of sacrifice and self-denial when he heals a man with a shriveled hand. The Pharisees are so enraged by this that they plot to kill him. The Pharisees are implacably opposed to Jesus because they sincerely believe that Jesus' concept of a just society is wrong. They are ideologically committed to the view that a just society is one in which people honour God by showing how much they are prepared to sacrifice for him; a society in which people will do what God says no matter what it may cost them. Jesus says this is baloney. A just society is rather one in which people honour God by showing mercy towards those in need; a society in which people seek to obey God's word in a way that expresses their love for people.

Now we are in a position to understand the otherwise perplexing statement of verses 15-17. There we are told that Jesus deliberately warned those he healed not to tell others who he was and that he did this to fulfill what Isaiah had said about the ideal King of Justice in Isaiah 42. Can you see Jesus' reason for doing this? He did it

precisely because his vision of a just society and the religious leaders' vision of a just society were irreconcilable. If the people Jesus healed went about urging people to crown Jesus as their King then they would be playing into the hands of the religious leaders and not contributing to the development of a truly just community.

In Isaiah 42 we are told of the ideal king, "*He will not quarrel or cry out; no-one will hear his voice in the streets*" (Mt 12:19). The point is that Jesus made no effort to have himself recognized as a political ruler precisely because this was not the right way to bring about justice; not the right way to develop a just community. Remember, this is a King who puts mercy before sacrifice. This is the King of whom Isaiah prophesied, "*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out*" (Mt 12:20). At the time Isaiah said these words God's people were in captivity in Babylon. They had been reduced to a pitiful state. There was not much evidence left of spiritual life. God's people were like the dying flame of a candle, like a damaged reed which would easily break if any weight was placed upon it. Jesus knows that a just society is a society in which damaged, vulnerable people, people like you and me, are gently and lovingly helped to be the people God intends us to be. Jesus knows that you don't end up with a just society if you place crushing weights on the shoulders of damaged, vulnerable people; if you keep on telling people what they must do and what they must not do; if you emphasise dos and don'ts and moral demands.

Jesus knows that a truly just society must be grounded in mercy and compassion and that it is up to him as the ruler of this society to set the pace, to embody that mercy and love and grace in his own person. This, therefore, is the King of Love who invites in Mt 11:28-30: "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.*"

What will attract people to King Jesus? Will they be attracted to Jesus the Legalist? Will they place their hope in Jesus the Moralist? Will they hope in a Jesus who says, "Do this or else"? Jesus certainly does require repentance. He does require that people respond to his message and learn from his wisdom. But he does not invite people to come to him so he can lay a heavier burden on their shoulders. He invites people to come to him so that he can take the burden off.

George Herbert said, "Hope is the poor man's bread." Aeschylus observed, "I know how men in exile feed on dreams of hope." An Italian proverb says, "If it were not for hope, the heart would break." All of these sayings communicate something of immense importance. It is desperate people who desperately need to have something or someone to hope in. People in poverty, people in exile, people whose hearts are breaking - desperate people need hope.

What is to be said to desperate people? Place your hope in Jesus, the King of Love, the King of Mercy and Compassion, the One who is gentle and humble in heart, the One who will treat your damaged life like a bruised reed he will take care not to break, who will take care not to snuff out that weakly burning candle which is your life. Jesus is building a just society and he invites you to be a citizen in his kingdom, to enter a realm where you will experience perfect justice, where people will be treated with

respect and love. Are you weary and burdened? Come to Jesus and find rest for your soul.