

Trinity 7 2023 Hope

Isaiah 44 vv 6-8 p729, Romans 8 vv 12-25 p1134, Matthew 13 vv 24-43 p979

For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for it? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.
(Romans 8^{24&25})

Reading the newspaper this week, I was struck by an incongruity. There have been stories from many parts of the world about terrible heat waves in places as far apart as southern Europe, North America and China. Temperatures have reached unprecedented levels. China has attained an all time high of 52.2C. That's just under 126F. People have died from the heat. There have been tremendous forest fires swept on by high winds in drought stricken regions of the world. Paradoxically, dreadful flooding in such places as South Korea has been brought about by a prolonged monsoon season, itself probably the result of an unusually heated atmosphere containing an excess of water vapour which has fallen as torrential rain.

The tone of these news reports has been apocalyptic and all of us are rightly horrified by these meteorological phenomena. What is going wrong with our weather? There is a growing conviction that we are experiencing catastrophic climate change. Or perhaps not, but if it's not man made climate change, what is causing these disasters? Something must be. What, if anything can we do about them?

Then, if you turn over a couple of pages to the UK weather reports, you will find forecasters lamenting that the temperatures in this country over the next few weeks are likely to be only about average for the time of year. Only average! Shouldn't we be thankful that we are not experiencing people dying in the streets of heat exhaustion, forest fires and monsoon rains? Probably, we could do with a bit of rain just now, but not floods and landslides. I'm enjoying the sun, but I wouldn't like it so hot that the authorities are telling us to stay indoors and to avoid exercise.

But what do we want? We're horrified by the high temperatures afflicting so much of the world, but we're expected to be disappointed if we only get an average summer this year.

It did occur to me that, if you alight from your 'plane in some holiday resort where the temperature is 10 degrees above what it ought to be and you blame this on global warming caused by the consumption of fossil fuels, you might ask yourself whether you should have flown there at all - rather than riding your bike to Skegness, maybe!

I deliberately used that word *unprecedented* to describe the heat in China because it was used so often during the worst of the COVID pandemic. It sometimes seemed like everything that we went through with COVID was described as unprecedented. So it was for most of us, although former generations and people in our own generation in other parts of the world have suffered far worse plagues than COVID.

Then there is the war in Ukraine. Did you ever think that we should see another war in Europe in our lifetime? Once the Cold War was over and the old Soviet Union broken up, the threat of war on our doorsteps seemed to have receded to the point of utter improbability.

What about the economic and political crises we are going through, the scandals besetting formerly respected institutions such as the Post Office, the BBC and the Police, the culture wars? My faith in this country has been badly shaken up over the last few years.

But not my faith in God. I have complete faith in God. I have no doubt that God is absolutely dependable. In the words of our Old Testament lesson, *Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God. Fear ye not, neither be afraid. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.* Our God is absolutely trustworthy. Ultimately, it is only God we can trust absolutely. We trust in Him; there is nothing else that can save us, but He can and will save us if we believe in Him.

It is true, as we read in the Gospel, that God created a world which is good. He is like a farmer sowing good seed in a wheat field. Yet the world which God creates is not a closed system. It is open. There is freedom. Evil enters God's perfect creation. The devil sows tares (weeds) in the good ground. Yet still God's Kingdom grows – *soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase* – like a tiny seed growing into a great tree or a small amount of yeast leavening a whole loaf. This is the world we live in where the evil is mixed in with the good but nevertheless God's purposes are advancing and His Kingdom is surely coming.

I have been reading the biography of Stuart Blanch (1918-1994) who completed his professional ministry by serving as Archbishop of York from 1975 till 1983. Another word I selected deliberately for these current troubles was *apocalyptic*. *Apocalypse* is the Greek word for revelation and the biblical Book of Revelation prophesies many horrors: war, famine, plague and natural disasters. Hence our use of the word *apocalyptic* to describe the very worst that can happen – the Judgment of God on a sinful world. But the Book of Revelation also contains sublime visions of glory. Good triumphs over evil. Christ overcomes the devil. The faithful participate eternally in the worship of heaven where there is no more pain or death and in which all our needs are met.

Back in the 1970s, Stuart Blanch was troubled as a pastor by the fact that so many people were living in fear of nuclear war. It was a time when America and NATO on the one hand and Russia and the Warsaw Pact on the other relied on a military doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. If either side started a nuclear war, the other would annihilate it with its own weapons of mass destruction. Thus, quite possibly, the whole human race would perish. The archbishop said this. Truly God has given us human beings freedom. It cannot be guaranteed that we will not be foolish enough to destroy ourselves in a nuclear war, but such an end would not be the end that God intends. The end that God intends for us is new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. As St Paul says in our epistle, *The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.*

We human beings do many foolish and wicked things. There is judgment. Actions have consequences. Yet God's Will will prevail. But where do we stand? What is our part in all this? How can we be sure that we are on God's side? Our part is to trust God and to obey His commandments. *We are saved by hope.*