

“Tear open the heavens and come down” a sermon based on Isaiah 64: 1-4, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on the first Sunday of Advent, 3 December 2017. It was also a Kirkin of the tartan service.

The Act of Proscription 1746 in Britain contained these words:

And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That from and after the first day of August, one thousand seven hundred and forty seven, no man or boy, within that part of Great Briton called Scotland, other than shall be employed as officers and soldiers in his Majesty's forces, shall on any pretence whatsoever, wear or put on the clothes commonly called Highland Clothes (that is to say) the plaid, philibeg, or little kilt, trowse, shoulder belts, or any part whatsoever of what peculiarly belongs to the highland garb; and that no TARTAN, or partly-coloured plaid or stuff shall be used for great coats, or for upper coats; and if any such person shall presume, after the said first day of August, to wear or put on the aforesaid garments or any part of them, every such person so offending, being convicted thereof by the oath of one or more credible witness or witnesses before any court of judicary, or any one or more justices of the peace for the shire or stewartry, or judge ordinary of the place where such offence shall be committed, shall suffer imprisonment, without bail, during the space of six months, and no longer; and being convicted for a second offence before a court of judicary or at the circuits, shall be liable to be transported to any of his Majesty's plantations beyond the seas, there to remain for a space of seven years.

The aim was to subdue the Highland rebels, to put them in their place, to enforce kingly rule, so Great Britain could be ruled with order, with consistency, without trouble, without disruption.

Some could not live under such harsh rules and emigrated.

Some joined the English army where Highlanders could wear the kilt.

Some of our forebears were transported.

And it appears that as a result of this provision, in some parts of Scotland, the art of making a tartan was lost.

But some faithful ones kept the art alive.

And there was, as we have heard, a protest, a rebellion of the heart: the defiant and hidden wearing of small patches under the outer garment.

People refused to give their heart to this imperial law.

And in 1782 it was repealed.

If the Christian movement is anything, it is a movement of patches worn defiantly.

The Christian movement is the wearing of small patches, defiantly, rebelliously, of small patches that speak of our longing for the day of God, of equality and justice, of peace and freedom, of fullness of life for all.

That is where our heart is, where our future and heaven is, and in the meantime we refuse to give in to ways of being that turn people poor, and turn people hard, and that subdue people with less than the day of God, that day that comes incipiently every day, even as we live into it.

The North African bishop, an early church theologian, St Augustine wrote, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the same." We may only speak of hope, if we speak of her two children.

The writer of Isaiah longed for the day of God.

"That you would tear open the heavens and come down."

For God to come crashing in, interrupting our world and making us pay attention. This writer wanted mountains to quake and nations to tremble because of God's coming.

Our text today was written around the time the first people came back to Jerusalem after years in exile. Many of those returning were the children of those who left their homeland decades before. They probably grew up hearing stories of Judah and how wonderful it would be to restore the capital city to its former glory. The children travelled to the city, hoping that what their parents said would be true.

When they arrived, their hearts sank. Jerusalem was destroyed, and it would be a long time before it was restored—if it happened at all.

It's at this point, when the people feel miles away from God that the writer asks to meet God— because life is a mess and they need God.

During Advent, the cry of Isaiah is our cry: God, tear open the heavens and come down, come and shape us, shape our community, shape us to be a rebel people, a people of defiant hope. Like Jerusalem, our world is not well. We wait for God to come and shake things up and change us for the better. We hope for the one who makes mountains quake and nations shake in fear—that this God will come and form us as disciples and bearers of good news.

What are our patches today? What do we wear defiantly, refusing to accept the world as it is? What makes us rebels, protestors, highlanders, hoppers?

The patch we wear is prayer. Prayer is an act of defiance. When we light the candle, when we open the bible, when we address God, we are naming a reality beyond what can trap us day by day, beyond our economic system, beyond the gods of this world, beyond what decimates creation and desecrates humans.

There is no right way to pray, but pray we must. There is no single way to pray, but pray we must. There is no easy way to pray, but pray we must. It is as core to being Christian as breathing is to being human. If we are not praying, if we have not prayed for a while, I invite you, start again, this new Christian year, in some way, your way.

You can see that next week we are offering a way to begin again because prayer is a core discipline of this church and of us as disciples. Even if we can't go every day, as I can't, we can go two or so. However many days, try.

Prayer is an act of hope that we become people of the new day.

At the end of this service we are going to sing an old hymn: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord". I wondered about this hymn with its imagery of marching and swords. And then I heard online Martin Luther King quoting it when speaking of the vision of a USA without racism. And he quoted the hymn as a statement of hope by a people oppressed, who believed God would bring a different world.

If we imagine this hymn is about imposing our ideas on an unwelcome world, imperially, let's not sing it. But if we imagine this hymn as a statement that God is at work in this world, inviting us to receive freedom for the oppressed and food for the hungry, if we are singing it as an act of hope, of anger and courage, of pleading for God to tear open the heavens and save us, then let's sing it with passion.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

growing in courage to live the Jesus way



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