

**“The grass withers, the flower fades ...” a sermon based on  
Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-13 and Mark 1:1-8 preached at Knox Church  
Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 6 December 2020.**

Scripture often surprises us. Familiar passages that dull over time because of their familiarity can break out and hit us in the gut, and wake us up. It happened to me last Sunday night at the Advent Processional here as I sat in the congregation. I was sitting down here listening to the readings and the music. The readings had the Advent spirit of hope and joy. And then we got part way through Isaiah 40 where there was a discordant note. I had heard the words before, but perhaps because of the year we have had, I heard these words afresh. We heard them this morning ... A voice says “Cry out!” and I said “What shall I cry? All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it ... The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

In Advent of all times, this time of expectation and hope, how strange to be reminded of our mortality and fragility and vulnerability. We are born. We live. We die. There are other Advent passages that sound a similar note, 2 Peter for example - “But the day of the Lord will come and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire ... Since all of these things are to be dissolved in this way ...” The very thing in which people put hope for a kind of elongating life, heaven, even heaven will pass away. We are temporary beings, grass that withers, flowers that fade, part of a dissolving earth, part of the dissolving heavens.

We know it physically. I like Prince Phillip’s typically blunt response to a question about how he was going – there are bits growing where they have never grown before, and bits falling off where they have never fallen before ... or something like that. COVID has reminded us of our vulnerability, even in New Zealand, even with a vaccine.

Why in Advent though? Last Sunday I said that at the start of a new Christian year, we begin at the end, in order to be reminded of the purpose of it all ... that at the end in the emerging patterns of our world, there will be the revealing of the Christ, and that is the future that is coming towards us. Well, today, we are given another dimension of the birth of Christ, we are reminded of its temporary, that Christmas is about new life and new hope, but it is also about the dissolving, the ending of what has been, to enable the new. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. And from the dust, from the earth, in the detritus of our fading and wilting, from our very humanness, Christ is born, who is in himself the ushering in of a new world. As at Easter, new life emerges from what ends.

This says something about what we live for and what we give ourselves to and how we see our lives. Years ago I read that the peculiar temptation of old age is melancholy, the disappointment that what we have given ourselves to comes to nothing or does not achieve what we thought it would, melancholy that our hopes remained unfulfilled and at its worst, that we have wasted our lives. There is a sense in which that is true for every person, no matter how marvellous we are – none of us have all our hopes fulfilled. Even Nelson Mandela did not achieve all he wanted. Even the most apparently successful person has to come to terms with the fact that what they gave themselves to does not work out as they thought it would. Donald Stuart, the first minister of this church, might have looked at the enduring institutions he helped establish, the University, the schools, the societies, but we read that he was also very troubled by the tragic lives of some of his family.

“The grass withers, the flower fades ...” That is true of every human enterprise, no matter how worthy. It is true of every human being, no matter how good. A friend of ours had oesophageal cancer, a terrible form of cancer. As he lived with the cancer, he infuriated his family by speaking theologically of his impending death – reflecting second Peter he would say – “My ego is going to be dissolved.” They said your death means much more than that, but he kept saying it. He was acknowledging his part in a bigger story and was pointing beyond himself.

In his terrible dying, he pointed to what endured. He was a John the Baptist.

Isn't that what these discordant passages are about - "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of God will stand forever." The Word of God is the living Christ, and what endures is what participates in his life in the world, what is part of the Christ-life into which we are drawn by the Holy Spirit, in which we share every day. Over time much might fall away from our work, our life, all our effort, but what endures is what is part of the work of Christ in our world. We cannot add to it. We cannot take away from it. And often we do not know what is part of the Word and what is not.

So what does that call from us? 2 Peter - "We wait for a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is our home." Righteousness is not about a narrow personal moralising but about right relating to God, to ourselves, to each other, to creation itself. Where right relating seems far distant for people who never have enough food, or enough warmth or enough of anything, the ending of this world and the promise of a new one is what gives them the most hope of all. A burden lifts from us in knowing that all things wither, that the world fades, that we fade, and that the Christ, the Word of God, and what shares in the life of Christ, stands.

Let me finish with part of a verse from what I think is one of Colin Gibson's greatest hymns

...God's heart is love, and that love will remain,  
holding the world for ever.  
No impulse of love, no office of care,  
no moment of life in its fulness;  
no beginning too late, no ending too soon,  
but is gathered and known in God's goodness.

Advent affirms that the grass withers and the flower fades, and the Word of God endures. We point beyond ourselves, with John the Baptist, to the enduring Christ, trusting that God will make of our lives what God wills, praying that what we do will be at least part of the enduring Word and relieved that we are not the judges of the worth of our lives.

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