

Watchnight service 31<sup>st</sup> Dec\_2018 VPBC. Geoff Thorington-Hassell.

## **Hope rather than remembrance**    *Isaiah 43; 19-21*

In previous years I have undertaken a photomontage of the year we have just had, along with a commentary as a reminder of what happened for it to also help us to pray. This year, given it has been the centenary of the end of the war to end all wars in 1918 there have a good many reflections, documentaries and events to remember “lest we forget.” **This year, however, I thought to focus on hope rather than remembrance.** Not that what we are likely to face in 2019 is likely to be any easier than 2018 but to try to look at the year ahead through the eyes of faith and expectation, of possibility, potential, change, improvement. To be surprised by grace, taken back by God’s undeserved blessing. To look beyond what we see and simply extrapolate and project, the same old, same old, and to be prepared to be surprised by joy. The unexpected. The bible encourages us to walk by faith, not by sight – and who hopes for what they see?

**What do you hope for?** That’s different from wishing for something or making a resolution that might make it past January. What is it you hope for? It is something tangible and real? Measurable? Concrete? For the Syrian’s from the Russian TV [drone footage](#) we looked at earlier it might be to rebuild their cities. Open schools. Repair and staff hospitals. Get the buses working again. Food enough to eat. For the refugees we saw on the [Croatian/Slovenia](#) border it is a safe place to lay their heads. Not having to move on. An opportunity to start again. To receive a place of welcome, of hospitality.

The water in the [Negev](#) was a surprise, capture by an Israeli cameraman in 2014. Normally the river bed is dry sand and broken boulder fields with empty waterfalls. Yet suddenly the water came pouring though.

**There are plenty of dry places on earth**, not just as a feature of global warming – not least as some places have been very wet indeed with terrible floods. The dry places I mean are those situations that never seem to change. They always remain the same. Stuck in the same ruts, the same difficulties. Where it is hard to flourish, hard to see things grow and improve. Harsh places where kindness, mercy, generosity seem to be missing most (if not all) the time. Grinding places where it is hard to make a living, make ends meet. A question of survival rather than living. Or folk trapped in the circumstances they find themselves and not sure and unable to see how positive change may come. **Why I like this Negev video clip is suddenly all that changes and for a few minutes I would like to reflect on God who makes a way, where there is no way. Where hope is more important than remembrance.**

**We will do that by looking at this passage from Isaiah.** These were dark and difficult times, and for many people in the trouble of these circumstances they had given up hope. Isaiah is writing to people in exile. People who were powerless and unable to change much of their situation but also were not blameless for the pickle they were in. They had forgotten the basics as far as God was concerned but God had not forgotten about them. Nonetheless, they were locked into a set of expectations as to how things should and could change and this was providing a real barrier for them being able to see and grasp the way forward that God was planning for them. There is both a comfort and a danger in looking back to the past as a pointer for what the future could be. Back to the glory days, to the way deliverance

had happened in the past that will help us make sense of the present and the way we can shape what the future will be. It is of value to know the past, but not to live in it. So, from the reading we have read God had assured the people that he still had a plan and a purpose, even though they had messed up, but what was coming was not what they were expecting.

Sometimes we think we know what God is likely to do because in similar circumstances he worked in a particular way and we expect God to work in that way again. This can limit and deceive us because we find it hard to discern and understand what God is actually doing because it isn't what we expected.

In the previous verses Isaiah reminded them that when they were oppressed and slaves in Egypt God made way through water by removing the water for them to walk on dry land and escape into the wilderness. The wilderness was the testing place, a place of formation and shaping to become the people of God. It was to prepare them for the realities of the promised land. To build a just, faithful and obedient people where God would be there God and they would be his people. To be a light to the nations both as a witness and as a worshipping community as to what God was like and what it meant to follow in his ways.

This time round, as God's people, he would take them out of the scorn and disgrace, the disaster and the failure of defeat and exile to be redeemed and restored. This time, however, God would make a way through the desert, the wilderness. A wilderness where there was no water- except this time God would put the water back in. Not just in flash floods, or oasis, or water from the rock and the arguments over food and water that marked and disfigured the Hebrews passage through a different set of deserts from Egypt. This time round in the wilderness there will be streams. Flowing water that would allow the people returning from exile in Babylon to flourish in the wilderness. The way back to being restored and redeemed was the willingness to trust God on the road into the dry difficult, marginal places, the hard places and relying on God that precisely it is in those unpromising lands would be the promise of life.

**Now there are various ways that this passage can be read but I would suggest that one way of reading this is through an eschatological lens, looking to times that were being spoken about beyond the immediate return from Babylon.** Not least, because as far as we know, when the Jews did go back it was staggered over many years. It was piecemeal and on occasions they had military escorts. Although God provided for them in that way, as far as we know, no miraculous streams appeared in the desert as they dribbled back to Jerusalem. Yet the picture of water is not just about a God who creates clouds, rains, rivers and streams- the physical means of life- but the spiritual too. **The promise is of the Spirit, the Spirit that gives life.** The Spirit that brings new life and commitment, fruit and blessing. It points to the Messiah and of the age of the Spirit. Where Jesus calls out on the last day of the feast to come and drink from the living water, he himself supplies. (John 7:37)

**Alongside this are those on the margins.** In the language of the poem, the doleful creatures of the night who get caught up as well in the blessings of God in the wilderness, in the wild places of earth as they are transformed.

**Ostriches had a bad reputation.** They were depicted as cruel mothers (Lam 4:30) and as highlighted in Job 39:13-18, who appears to be a bit of a naturalist, *"the ostrich leaves her eggs on the ground for the soil to warm them. She is unaware that*

*a foot may crush them, or a wild animal break them. She acts as if the eggs were not hers and is unconcerned and her efforts are wasted.”*

In fact, the eggs may well have not been hers. The male had several partners (*other people’s children*) and they were all deposited in the same nest. There is a major hen, who he is loosely shackled up with, and the others are one-night stands. They all leave the eggs in the nest together and have no further role in rearing the young. The major hen makes sure her eggs are in the centre while leaving the eggs on the rim open to vulture attack. In the bible ostriches represent desolation, ruins, destruction, depopulation, a loss of hope that no one will ever live there again (Is 13:20,21). Yet now that changes. They are in their normal environment and blessed by God despite the fact that they are unclean. The Hebrew word for ostrich means “greediness.” The Asian ostrich of the bible lands, however, became extinct since 1966 which is why in this image it is depicted as a skeleton.



Jackal in Hebrew means “howler.” The golden jackal is more often an opportunist. A “jack the lad” or “jack the jackal.” Often hunting in pairs, they are not solitary animals. Sometimes they move in extended family groups of eight or dozens of jackals together at major food sources - especially at rubbish dumps. They scavenge and clean up – including the bodies on battle fields (Psalm 63:9-10 NIV). They communicate with howls, barks, growls, whines, cackles, yelps. Jackals are unloved.



**There are plenty of people on the margins who make us fearful and afraid. That are difficult to love- like jackals- and others we despise – like ostriches. But instead of remembrance there is hope. And that hope in 2019 continues as God makes a way through the wilderness through the power of the Spirit. To walk on that way will need God’s Spirit and as the wilderness is transformed it touches, includes and blesses those too that are on the margins.**

Instead of remembrance there is hope - to be refreshed and renewed by God’s Spirit as he makes a way in the wilderness, whatever the dry and difficult challenges that lie ahead.