

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

They do say that opposites attract. Certainly that's true for me and my wife, Laura. When you're able to hold opposites together, you do get a wonderful creative tension. When it doesn't work so well, you just get the tension. In the kitchen, you might try and prepare a dish which is both sweet and sour.

Churches, well certainly in England, often use the hymn book, Ancient and Modern, trying to hold together the best of the old and the new. In fact, as Episcopalians, we should be good at living with creative tension, because we're in a tradition that tries to hold together the best of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. We explore that *Via Media*, the middle way.

There are two great Advent themes in our reading today that need to be held together in such a creative tension. According to our readings, you can't have one without the other, even though they might at first sight seem opposite. I'm talking about the twin themes of hope and judgment. The sweet and sour of the Advent season. Advent invites us to look at both together, and not choose one over the other. Hope and judgment belong in a creative tension. I want to look at them in turn. I'll start with hope.

Hope features in all our readings. Hope is a strand that runs through the whole Bible. Hope is tethered to God like a rope, running from one end of history to another. Isaiah expresses that hope in the reading we heard in terms of anticipating the day when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid. "On that day," the prophet says, "the dwelling of the messiah shall be glorious." The message of John the Baptist was that this promised kingdom has come near. "The time has come," he says, "to prepare the way of the one long promised." Saint Paul, in the reading from the Epistle to Romans is full of hope. See how our reading ends. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

These readings, and in fact the whole of the biblical witness, are sure that our hope has secure foundations. There is more to this world than meets the eye. Our hope is anchored elsewhere. Our hope has been created by a God who will act decisively at the end of time to establish a new kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace. Our hope is not in this world. A better day is coming. As Saint Paul says,

"The night is nearly over. The day is almost here."

My favorite image of hope comes from the Old Testament story of Noah. You'll know the story well. He built a huge ark, took the animals on there, and went out, and the rain came, and the ark floated. Then, the rain stopped, but for weeks, Noah found himself floating on the water. He could see nothing when he looked out from the prow of his boat except an expanse of water that seemed to have no end. He wondered if it ever would come to an end, or was this how life was going to be? He sent out a raven. The raven flew around, and came back empty-beaked. Then, a few days later, he sent out a dove. The dove returned with an olive branch in his beak. Noah knew that he couldn't see land anywhere. He couldn't see a tree anywhere. He couldn't see an olive tree anywhere, but he knew there was one because the dove had brought back a twig in its beak. He knew that there was dry land out there somewhere.

We too are given olive branches, signs that there's more to this world than meets the eye, that there is a spiritual world that we might not always be able to see, but we can know it's there. We get those signs, those branches which offer glimmers of hope. I'm sure many of you have seen that wonderful film, *The Shawshank Redemption*. The main theme of that film is the relationship between two men in a prison, one older, one younger. They're very different. One has been ground down by being institutionalized for so long. He doesn't even want to think of trying to escape. The other is younger, a more innocent character. He's full of hope, and dreams of life outside the prison walls. Which brings the following response from his older friend. He says, "Hope is a dangerous thing. It makes men go insane. It makes them think that there's life beyond these walls." In other words, hope causes people to be dissatisfied by encouraging them to imagine something different.

Advent is a time to hope, to stir up our holy dissatisfaction with how things are. It's a time to remember the coming kingdom, to see our lives in this world from that perspective, from the vantage point of an end when all things will be made new. Advent is a time to remember that things won't always be as they are now, that God will have the last word when he establishes his glorious kingdom.

I'll leave my last word on hope to Einstein, who said that it was good to have hope. He said, "Science describes how things are, whilst religion tells us how they should be, and will be."

Let me turn now to the theme of judgment, which too comes across strongly in all the readings that we've heard in our service today. It runs alongside, intertwined, with the theme of hope. In Isaiah, "The promised messiah will," he says, "not judge by what his eyes see, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." Judgment seems to be an essential element in the establishing of God's kingdom. When the psalmist portrays the reign of the great Messianic king, he begins by asking the king to be given justice, that he may rule the people righteously, and the poor with justice, so that the poor may be defended and the oppressors crushed.

Of course, it's John the Baptist who comes up with the most colorful and flamboyant language. He says that, "The coming messiah has his winnowing fork in his hand, and that he will clear the threshing floor, and he will gather the wheat into the granary, whilst the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." It's such talk of judgment and separation which easily offends our modern sensibilities. We live in a culture that doesn't like to separate, to draw distinctions. To separate is to judge. We much prefer to be inclusive. How can a God of love, we wonder, ever be involved in any judgment?

Well, I heard a story recently that helped me begin to answer that. I can't remember the details, but I know it happened in the south somewhere. A young man was pulled from a river by a much older man. Several years later, the young man sadly murdered his partner, and he was up in court. He was very pleased to see the judge. He was pleased to see him because he recognized him as the man who'd pulled him from the river earlier on. His pleasure disappeared when the judge sentenced him to life in prison. He said, "How can you do that? Why save my life only to condemn me to die in jail?" The judge said, "Once I came to you as savior, now I stand before you as judge."

Remember we're holding on to this tough talk of judgment in the context of our Advent hope. Judgment is part of that hope. The Bible assures us that God will not act capriciously, he doesn't execute random judgments. His judgment will establish peace and righteousness on earth. He will act to right all wrongs. Tom Wright says this, "Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human race. If there is no justice, then deep within ourselves we know that something is out of joint. Justice is hard to define, and

harder still to put into practice, but that has never stopped human beings and societies seeking it, praying for it, and working to find ways of doing it better. Justice doesn't simply mean punishing wickedness, though that is regularly involved. It means bringing the whole world back into balance."

We all recognize the world is out of balance. Something is not right. Central to the Jewish and Christian traditions is the belief that this passionate longing for justice comes from God himself, because we believe that God is a God of justice, and that he will, at some point, act to establish his justice over all the earth. The world will one day be balanced again. There's a great picture of this in the last chapter of the Bible, or the last penultimate chapter, where we read this in the Book of Revelation. "See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, death will be no more. Mourning, and crying, and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

That's an image of the kingdom which is to come. We're bombarded with images and stories of suffering from all over the world. It's unrelenting. Every day, new and terrible tragedies occupy our headlines. Of course, we're only aware of a fraction of the world's sadness. Many people have been led to think that the suffering of the world is so tragic, so inexplicable, so unrelenting, that they're forced to conclude that life is meaningless. I can understand such a view. What keeps me from descending into despair and hopelessness is the firm belief that the sufferings of this world, from the refugees from Syria, to the sadnesses in my own life, that they do not go unnoticed.

God sees, and God will one day act to redeem all that has been lost. Suffering would render the world futile if it was the last word, but it isn't. There will be a day when justice is done, when the world will be redeemed, when God's new kingdom will be established. On that day, things will be put right and brought back into balance, and God will wipe away every tear. We can't jettison judgment. It's there as an essential part of our Advent hope. Judgment and hope, two things that are inextricably intertwined.

Amen.