

**The Road to Transformation**

*Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12*

Amongst the earliest lessons we get about how things transform will have been those in primary school nature classes. I remember something like awe as a 5 year old when I held an acorn in my hand and was told by Miss Ross, our Primary One Teacher – “You are holding an oak tree in your hand.” I remember with fascination watching one of those lapsed time videos as an insect egg turned into a larva, then into a caterpillar, then into a pupa, then, quaveringly, hesitantly into a butterfly that unfurled its wings, warmed and dried them in the sunlight, then floated off into the sky.

And who amongst us of a certain age doesn't remember Danny Kaye singing his song from the Hans Christian Anderson story about the Ugly Duckling that, despite it's original feathers “all stubby and brown” transformed, “with a glide and a whistle and a snowy white back and a head so noble and high” into the beauty that is a swan?

Transformation means that we go beyond our normal form. It's not only a visible change, dramatic enough, it is something deeper and more profound. You might want to call it a spiritual change. It is certainly a change of attitude and approach and outlook on life.

Advent gives us opportunity not only to pause and reflect, it also gives us opportunity to think, through faith, about the kind of world we want to live in. God promises a deep, fundamental change in social relations, in the way our world is meant to be. Rooted in God's promises to us is the gift of inspiration and determination not to accept the world the way that it is if we believe, with others, that the world needs to be a different and better place. A world where loneliness is addressed. A world where people with poor health – physical and mental – are not only cared for but accepted. A world where the inequalities caused by poverty are balanced out. A world where education is not seen merely as a privilege but as a right. A world where the least and the lost are no longer overlooked or seen as unworthy.

Isaiah talks about One Who is coming, it can only be Jesus, Who will be inspired by God's Spirit. Someone Whose wisdom is informed by understanding; someone Whose common sense is emboldened by determination; someone whose knowledge is illuminated by respect for God. Someone Who will judge not by appearances or hearsay, but by what God shows is right and fair – to love our neighbours as ourselves. This King that is to come will be dressed with righteousness and faithfulness, and in His Kingdom the predator and the prey will be at ease and peace with each other, and the gentlest children will lead them and play around them and come to no harm.

Every time I read the prophet Isaiah I am reminded that it is sometimes called the 'Fifth Gospel', because it clearly is echoed by Jesus in His ministry and teaching. Isaiah talks about a King Who will come, and a Kingdom that will spread universally across humanity and its world, "as the waters cover the sea." There is something of the universal manifesto about Isaiah, and it seems to me to be extraordinary that in the country we know today as Israel-Palestine a prophet with such imagination and vision could see beyond the narrow confines of his crumbling society and world towards something bigger, grander, and all-embracing.

And what is positive, affirming, encouraging and wondrous is that this great new vision comes when it is least expected. This transformation of the rotten, weary, jaded world comes not from a starburst or an explosion or a revolution. "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Jesse, the father of David, Israel's greatest king, founded a dynasty that by the time of Isaiah had run its course. It had been ended by the Babylonians and humiliated by the Assyrians. It was a time of despair and resignation. The children of Israel felt it was all over.

Then God's Spirit comes. God's life-giving, future-creating, despair-ending, world-transforming Spirit comes. And from the stump of the cut-down tree a little shoot comes. The deep-root of God's presence has not been severed or poisoned, it's still there, and it will grow out of what seems dead and irrelevant.

Is this an image for our world, fearing political calamity, economic disaster, social collapse? Is this an image for the Church feeling isolated and vulnerable and edged out? Is this an image for you, feeling weary, taken for granted, hurting. The road to transformation takes us passed this stump of an ancient tree, which no-one would look at twice. But look again, for a shoot is growing from it, and that shoot will transform the world, because it is Jesus, and what He has to say, and what He came to do, still speaks to a frequently bewildered world.

On the road to transformation, in this season of Advent, beside a font fit for baptism and a table soon to be set with bread and wine, I will not despair, though the world is turning upside down. I will not despair, though the hurts are real. I will not despair, though walls may be built. I will not despair, though light is flickering. I will not despair, because hope will come. I will not despair, because truth will triumph. In all that has happened in our world in 2016, much of which has saddened and dismayed, faith will give the courage, the strength, the vision and the resilience that is needed. Divisions must be bridged, and **all** the children of faith must be the people to do this. I will not despair, for though my hopes and dreams have not always carried the day, I believe the arc of God's justice bends inexorably towards mercy. We work steadily to see God's kingdom, in all its challenging discomfort, established. I will not despair, because there is, always, hope.

John the Baptist, in an equally bleak time in the history of the world, called from the desert to his people to tell them to repent, to turn around 'for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Using the image of the harvest, John tells of the old, done-with, dried-out protective coating of the chaff being burned away, so that the wheat, the seed, the nourishment, the promise of God's essential love in Jesus might be brought to light.

The husk of despair and fear and prejudice will be removed, and the kernel of God's transforming, inclusive, hospitable love will be laid bare, and the world and its people will be changed. Step by step along that road to transformation. It will be a time of reconciliation. It will be a time of mercy. It will be a time of new possibilities. On the road to transformation the Spirit

of God blows against the hopeless stump of what has failed, and broken, and stirs the tiny leaf of a new shoot that promises life.

In the Burne Jones window above the communion table we tend to look at the images of saints and animals and Bible stories. Woven into the backdrop is greenery, leaves of hope, promises of growth and nourishment and shelter and protection. On the road to transformation, this is where we're heading – to new growth, and new beginning, and new hope. The hope that leads to action, overturning old assumptions and sad cynicism, and encouraging us to live out loud in faith.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**