

**Great expectations**

*Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2*

August in Scotland cues a host of different expectations. Last week the results of exams came in for many of our young people, with hopes lifted or dashed.

Or if you have been going to anything at the Festival, take a brazen walk down the Royal Mile and be assailed by flyer-laden hopefuls who promise the 'best show ever' about Kafka, Sondheim, Ibsen or some other classic by groups of the keenest young people you will ever have met; to say nothing of the comedians, jugglers, dance troupes and acrobats. You can almost cut the air of expectation with a knife in that section of the Royal Mile from George IV Bridge to North Bridge.

Other levels of expectation carry on throughout the year. The person going to visit an oncologist – will it be good news or bad news? The person going for a job interview – will they be successful or unsuccessful? The person putting in a bid for their first home. The person going on a first date – will it be love or just another one to chalk up to experience?

Expectations have to do with our hopes and our fears, our dreams and our nightmares. Expectations can be negative, and positive. There will be no one here in Church today, or watching online, unfamiliar with the realised and disappointed expectations of life.

When expectations go unfulfilled, they can almost ruin us with bitterness. We have all had the experience of having done everything right only to have our efforts result in no return. In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, it's not hard for the Christian to hear this ancient Jewish song and hear in the metaphor of the disappointed gardener the metaphor for God, and for ourselves. This is a parable about expectations.

In the story from Isaiah, the gardener has done everything right. The land was fertile, the work was thorough, but instead of sweet grapes to enjoy and nourish, the vineyard yielded wild, bitter grapes and with very little fruit. What he tasted was a bitter disappointment. The result did not live up to the hopes, dreams and expectations – of God.

The children of God are deeply loved in every generation. How awful it is to be brought before God Who says, "I'm so disappointed in you. You have not lived up to My expectations." Like a parent, like a teacher, these words can cut deeper than any harsh criticism or stinging rebuke.

Looking at our world today, our country, our community, God has nurtured, protected and tended, God has given us every skill and opportunity and encouragement, yet still the world goes hungry; still the world adds to a growing ecological crisis; still the world protects better the wealthiest and most privileged; still the world makes life hard for the vulnerable and the poor and the voiceless. All the great expectations God had for God's world so often seem to crumble to ash and dust. Isaiah leaves us with a dark and frightening possibility. God might give up.

And yet. And yet. Judgement may come down, and punishment, before the good news can come. There is hope to come, but first we must be willing to see the awfulness of what we have done, and what we are doing.

In the end, we know, God does not give up. God does not stop singing songs of love. God still plants, and ploughs and guards. God still looks for good fruit from us. God perseveres. God's expectation, God's great expectation, is about perseverance, because God's hope in us, for us, maybe even despite us, is that we will come good in the end. God still has faith in us.

This is the lesson from the letter to the Hebrews. It tells of the history of faith. Faith beaten and bruised and maimed and thwarted, but faith that never quite gives up. It perseveres. The long litany of suffering that people of faith in different generations endured so that the goodness of

the good news could be passed on is one we would do well to remember, and add to as we look around at the people we know who, despite everything, because of everything, hold on.

They didn't get everything they were promised, but they held on, because it was the right thing to do. To trust in a relationship with God Who sustained them, and held on to them, and refused to let go.

Were they fools? Were they deluded? Were they naïve? All the usual jibes thrown at people of faith down through the ages. But they held on. Encouraged by each other, the great cloud of witnesses. Encouraged by God Who never gave up on them, or on the promise God made to be with all God's children, always. They had great expectations. They had great hope. And that is what kept them going.

It is not easy being a Christian today. People will ask why we settle for this great expectation of something better to come when most demand proof of blessing in the here and now. In a world growing increasingly impatient, people stand, hands reached out, demanding, "now!"

In the face of so much discouragement and negative news about decline and closure and readjustment there will be many who wonder, 'what is the point?' Why do I still bother? It has been one of the characteristics of the post-lockdown society, and indeed the post-lockdown church, that has led to a distancing from engagement and commitment. Have we been in the shadows of Covid for too long? I can't help but feel that we need to learn the joy, the privilege, and sometimes the sacrifice of active, face-to-face re-engagement whenever that is possible. What an expectation that is!

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was writing to Jewish Christians who had become discouraged and demoralised. They felt excluded from the mainstream of society and felt political

pressure from the Jewish religious establishment of their day. Their expectations were low, their hope, if possible, even lower.

This passage sets out a vision of what faith, through hope, can do, and even, dare I say, expect. Faith allows us to see beyond what is right in front of us, our daily problems, and see what God is doing right in our midst, to see what God has done in the past, and to see the future that God is holding out to us in both hands. God's expectations for us are about hope, and joy, and wonder, and imagination, and lives that are helpful. God's expectations for us are about a vision of what might yet be, not what never shall be. When Martin Luther King gave his great speech of hope and expectation on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, he said, "I have a dream", not "I have a nightmare." Despite generations of slavery and persecution and a denial of basic human rights, Martin Luther King could stand on mountain tops and expect to see promised lands, even though he himself never got there. He had great vision, he had great hope, he had great expectations, just like the faithful mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews, just like God planting the vineyard in Isaiah. Jesus endured for us. We have much to look forward to, and much to expect, if we remain faithful.

Why should we have optimism about our future? Do we have optimism about the future?<sup>i</sup> These are the questions we wrestle with daily, when the news is bleak, when circumstances in our own lives, and the lives of loved ones, gives cause for concern. But we persevere. We have our hopes. We have our expectations. We have our faith.

It may be late in the day. We may have endured much in the great race of life. We may be winded and tired, but this is the race that counts; this is what we have to commit to; this is what we have to complete; this is where we have to hand on the baton to those coming after us.

I can't see into your minds and hearts today here in church, or into those eyes that are watching on line. But I know there will be those whose expectations are great; or have been greatly dashed. Times are hard for many people and may get harder. Yet we still have faith, and that leads to hope, and it will work out in love. These great expectations. To keep us moving forward; inventing and reinventing our lives with God and with all God's people, striving, and reaching out, and helping others and being helped by others. Making our world better, so that this is what we, in our turn, may pass on to others.

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

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> David E Gray, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 3 p354