

2024 TALK FOR CAREY, 1.12.24, ISAIAH 2:1-5,12-21 / LUKE 4:14-21

LIVING IN HOPE – AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

(THE POLITICS OF HOPE – AND THE GOSPEL OF FREEDOM)

‘The light of the morning is breaking’... Alleluia! Jesus, our Bright Morning Star, the author & perfecter of our faith, the Light of all the world. The One who shines brighter than 10,000 of this particular sun of our solar system... Our Messiah is coming, just as he promised. God will not be indecisive about the day of Our Saviour’s arrival. Our Father will not prevaricate: ‘Ooh, should it be this day, or that day, I don’t know...’. As we begin this wondering season of Advent, we celebrate the living hope of the Christian faith: Christ has come in the flesh; Christ will come again - this time in glory.

I was very encouraged to see this video of Phil Moore, who has just written what he feels is the most important book of his life. A book about a world-wide spiritual revival which is currently sweeping our planet, almost unseen & unnoticed. Great to hear of many people, from all sorts of cultures & backgrounds, coming to faith in Jesus. People who had been in despair, finding hope & new life. Alleluia! Come LORD Jesus!

Wonderful to see the church re-discovering its confidence in sharing the good news of Jesus. Seeing with new eyes, that each believer has the the authority & the instructions & the resources of Jesus. All that we need. The fresh realisation that each follower of Jesus can give a reason for the hope they have, to those around them. The ‘Forgotten Manifesto of Jesus’ which Phil Moore speaks of, is to be found in Matthew 10 & Luke 10. Both these intriguing passages build a picture of an exciting church on the move. Church in its simplest form - bringing healing, deliverance & new life. A community of hope, as it looked during the ministry of Jesus; as it looked during the first century, when Christians were often forced to flee; scattered due to persecution.

There is the biggest challenge, particularly for the church in the West. For Carey & for myself too. We long to see people coming to faith & our churches growing. But perhaps we are too attached to our comfortable lifestyles. Too much looking to celebrate ‘Christmas as usual’... We see the way that God has been shaking the nations. We see too many disasters. We hear of wars & rumours of wars. Millions of people being forced to move from their homes & their homelands. So, we pray, we give, we hunker down, grateful that we are

not in the same boat... But we are, aren't we? We are all in same boat when it comes to climate breakdown. (Although the poorest of our world are already feeling its effects). It's an uncomfortable truth, which we might not want to hear right now. Much better to talk of: 'Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat'. Much rosier to talk of: 'chestnuts roasting on an open fire'.

So, yes, I heartily welcome Phil Moore's challenge: Now is the time for the church, particularly in the West, to re-discover the call to share our faith in Jesus, hope of the nations. To re-discover the true cost of following Jesus... What does it mean for us to believe & to go the way of Jesus in these days of the relentless storms facing our planet – both physical storms – as well as political & economic & social storms...?

However, there is another 'forgotten manifesto of Jesus'. It doesn't get a mention in Phil Moore's book. Nor does Mary's song of praise, when she began to realise the far-reaching implications of her carrying the Christ-child. Mary prophesied about God, 'bringing down rulers from their thrones'. And the first (& only) recorded time when Jesus publicly reads scripture during his ministry, Jesus promises to: 'proclaim good news to the poor'.

If you are not sure whether or not the good news of Jesus is truth that is both spiritual & political, you need look no further than Advent & Christmas. Indeed our fundamental statement of faith, 'Jesus is LORD' is both a spiritual & a political statement. Something that was quickly realised by the Romans in the 1st Century, who wanted people everywhere to own Caesar as their Lord... Following Jesus, our cosmic Saviour, has far-reaching implications, even into the murky world of politics. But this does not mean we should identify church with a particular political party. No political party or movement has all the answers. So, those many Christians in the U.S. who have pinned their hopes on Donald Trump may well be in for a big shock & a massive disappointment. The President-elect talking in such Messianic terms about a 'great, golden future' for America, should itself be enough to get loud warning signals sounding for the faithful. In this season of the growing darkness of Advent we are called, more than ever, to keep praying & be on our guard against being deceived.

The good news of Advent is that only ***Christ*** will bring his Kingdom of peace & justice to this world. This is an everlasting Kingdom of truth & light. A new world where, as the prophet Isaiah promised, all peoples will know true healing

& where all divisions will end. Christ is the source & inspiration for the living hope we proclaim this Advent. Jesus is the beginning & end of all things.

And, as Chami proclaimed last week: while we wait & hope & pray for the arrival of Christ's Kingdom, we are called to walk & work towards it. We are called to live in the light of this Kingdom. To embody the good news of Jesus.

One of the things which I find uncomfortable about Phil Moore's book is his summary analysis of the Iranian Revolution. He is understandably critical of the current absolutist & oppressive regime in Iran, which has alienated many people of that nation from the Muslim faith. A regime which is contributing to the de-stabilisation of the Middle East. A regime which constantly funnels money to men of violence, committed to the destruction of the state of Israel.

However, this is to overlook the history of Iran. The previous, corrupt regime of the Shah, who was equally committed to the oppression of his people, while being supported by Western nations. The questionable Western support for Iran's earlier regime, is what gave birth to the Ayatollahs in the first place... Too easy for us to have very short memories when it comes to history.

We too readily equate the so-called 'Christian nations' with the cause of freedom. We Christians can too easily see ourselves as 'having the light', whereas others (those of other faiths) are in darkness. Phil's book talks of today's Iranian rulers of imposing their strict & harsh version of Sharia Law. And this is absolutely true. However, we Christians may need to take the plank out of our own eye, before we take the plank out of the eyes of the Ayatollahs.

It is an inescapable truth that, in the past, churches have used the word of God as an instrument of oppression. And sadly, this can still be seen today, in other nations & this nation too. When I talk of churches being instruments of oppression in the past, what do I mean? I'm thinking of the Tithes of the established church in this land, which often impoverished the ordinary people. One of the first demands of those who took part in the Peasants Revolt in the 14th Century was for some relief from Tithes & other offerings, which the church expected from the poor.

There is also the case of the Slave Trade. Many Christians in the 18th Century defended the abhorrent practice of taking & keeping slaves. And they often quoted the Bible to defend this. I am glad to say that many Baptists, including William Carey himself, campaigned for many years against slavery. Indeed,

during my sabbatical research a few years ago, I discovered that any Sunday when Carey was in the pulpit, he prayed for the freeing of the slaves. This global injustice was ever on his heart & on his lips. The campaign to abolish slavery is certainly something he mentions several times in his famous book on world evangelisation, 'An Enquiry'. Carey clearly saw both political action against injustice & sharing the Christian faith, as going hand-in-hand.

A more recent example of Biblically-justified oppression relates to the churches (often appalling) treatment of women over the centuries. As late as the last century, the Bible was quoted to try to deny women the right to vote. And even still today, the Bible is *still* being used as a weapon to try to ensure that women are not treated as being equal with men.

An example from today, which I hesitate to refer to, is the Assisted Dying Bill before Parliament right now. Many churches have understandably publicly declared their opposition to this Bill. This is largely on the basis that disabled people & older people should not be made to feel that they are a burden on society & on their families. But there is also the view that only God can decide when someone's time is up, that human beings should not interfere with life's 'natural course'. This is to ignore the blatant truth that modern medicine & science is routinely interfering with life's 'natural course', to extend life.

I think what makes me uncomfortable about these public proclamations is the presumption that there is one 'Christian view' about this legislation. Some Christians come to see themselves as being the 'voice' for the whole church. But there are those who believe that a Christ-centred case can be made for assisted dying, in particular circumstances. To avoid prolonged suffering, of both the person with a terminal illness & their families.

All these examples show that the gospel of Jesus points us towards freedom. The freedom to interpret God's word differently, under the guidance of God's Spirit. (This kind of religious freedom was always at the heart of the Baptist thinking, way back in the 16th century). And both the history of our churches & the good news of Jesus also point us towards bigger political freedoms. This is only possible if we give the gospel of Jesus priority over the law of Moses, as Jesus himself taught when it came to Sabbath-keeping & giving, for example. People today, in this country are still oppressed by Christians who quote the Bible against them. People like: refugees & asylum-seekers; as well as people

living with same-sex attraction. But what does Advent & Christmas remind us?
... It is this: Christ brings light to all. In a world which is being shaken, we are ***all***
called to live as children of light. We are not called to live under the law of
Moses, but in the light of Christ. As Paul said: 'It is for freedom that Christ has
set us free'. Let us live in the light-filled hope of the glory of our Saviour Jesus.