

Kingdom come

How good were the good old days? Remember the time when the Sunday School was overflowing, when finding teachers for Sunday School was easy, when the church was packed, and there were more people than tasks to go around?

Remember the time when you could buy a house on a quarter-acre block on a single income – and that single income was only an average wage – and you could move in before the landscaping was completed to a degree that satisfied council? That time when a visit to the petrol station or the grocery store didn't drain your bank account?

Remember the time when you could qualify as a teacher or an accountant or a nurse without going to university?

Remember when children could safely play and ride bikes on the street?

How good were the good old days?

Of course, back then you couldn't get good coffee. Or pasta. Or any foreign cuisine other than Chinese. And houses were often made of asbestos. And there were often no seatbelts, let alone airbags, and bicycle helmets were unknown.

And medical care... chemo and radiotherapy were crude. Blood pressure medication had dire side effects. Early diagnosis didn't often happen.

But yes, the good old days.

It was a simpler time then, in many ways, a better time - or so it often seems. We tend to look back at the past through rose-tinted glasses, remembering the good but overlooking the bad.

But wouldn't it be great to go back to the times our youth, when we had energy and enthusiasm to spare – and so did our peers. When our now-departed friends were still with us and we were living out those stories – rather than remembering the time and time again.

For many people on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, the rallying cry has been “Make America Great Again” and they've elected a president on the basis of that cry. We might ponder, though, what time they consider it was 'great' before, I think it is very much a backward-looking cry – let's go back to the good old days. The days when America was great, in whatever ways you might consider it to have been great.

We see a similar thing in our politics here too, though not many have been unwise enough to say “Make Australia Great Again” out loud, but we have calls to build manufacturing (even build cars again!), to reduce or restrict immigration, to have our suburbs sprawl further and further, to restore education to what it was in the 1950s.

America and Australia are not alone in such desires: pressures are growing for similar things in much of Europe. Maybe we've become used to how good things are and think they're under threat – maybe we've become complacent in our affluence and a worried that others will take it away.

So often, we want to go back to the good old days. But the truth is that the past is passed, and we can't go back.

Of course, one of the reasons that we look back fondly on the past, is because we're afraid of the future. Or even in because we're disappointed in the present.

We loved the good old days. We miss them. I think the American writer Thomas Wolfe made an astute observation when he wrote:

"You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood ... back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame ... back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting, but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory." (You can't go home again, 1940)

In our Old Testament reading today, through the prophet Isaiah, God was speaking to people who once had a way of life that was now lost, and they longed to have it once again. Life had been good (in their 'good old days'), or so they thought.

But then, as we've heard in church in recent times, the Babylonians invaded, killed many of their loved ones and friends, carried off the youngest and the best into a foreign land, occupied their homes and filled themselves with the produce from gardens that they, the people of Judah, had built. The world they had known and loved was gone. They sat down by the rivers of Babylon and wept, and they pondered how they could ever sing songs in that foreign land.

Eventually they were allowed to return. By Isaiah's time, they had been back for fifty odd years - a couple of generations - but things are not the same as they had been before. They were certainly not in the 'good old' days anymore.

They'd had half a century to restore Jerusalem and the temple to its former glory. But they found themselves living in the remnants of the land and the city that their ancestors knew. They weren't in exile in Babylon anymore, but in many ways, they were still living in despair.

The temple was a mere shadow of what it had been before the exile. The walls surrounding the city still lie in rubble, not fit to even trouble any future invaders.

And then along came the prophet Isaiah, and he came bearing God's word for those people who in despair and longing for a different time, longing the good old days. And Isaiah brought them a message of hope – not just a hope that things might get a little bit better, but joyous message that things that would be put right. The message of hope that Isaiah brought them came straight from God, and it was a message of certainty.

God was giving his people a vision of a future that was not the 'good old days' restored, but it was vision of a future which would be new, a restored paradise, where there are broken things would be renewed - mended and restored – and given wholeness and purpose and meaning once again.

Doesn't that sound great? Our circumstances are, I think, much better than what the people of Isaiah's time knew. We may not be broken as such, but we're all at least been dented and scarred by our experiences: we've all known loss, and sadness and disappointment. And we all at least sometimes would rather be back in the good old days.

Isaiah's message of hope and redemption was for the people back in Isaiah's time, but it also a message for us today. Something – someone – new was coming.

The message that God gave to his despairing people through Isaiah is as real and relevant for us today as it was four centuries or so before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Isaiah's message was for those people in ancient Judah – but it is also very much for each one of us – and all of us together – today. We need to take it to heart, and be reassured and comforted by it, even today in the twenty-first century.

Listen to it like this:

But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create [St Ives Uniting Church] to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over [the people of St Ives] and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard [there] no more (65:18-19)

Next week is the end of the liturgical year – the church year – and a few weeks after that we get to the end of the calendar year. And the ends of years are always a good time to reflect and to plan. People send out Christmas letters of their year in review. People make new year's resolutions. People open up new diaries. People catch up with people they haven't spoken to since the same time last year. And people remember and miss their family and friends who are no longer with them.

It is okay to look back at the past. It is okay to fondly remember the good old days. But we mustn't be overwhelmed or be preoccupied by them, because if we are, we lose appreciation of the blessings of today, and the future God that has in store for us.

And what a future God does have in store for us:

Isaiah tell us "...the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years [...] my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labour in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them."

At Women's Day fellowship the week before last, I offered a reflection on the poetry of Ecclesiastes – those words made famous by Peter Seeger and the Byrds in the song "Turn, turn, turn." The writer of that passage tells us here is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:" (Ecclesiastes 3:1) and goes on to tell us about the times that we all go through:

A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance... a time to love and a time to hate. And so on.

I reflected that we all go through those times, and it's a cycle, we weep, but then we laugh, we mourn, but then we dance, and over and over again. Joy, sorrow, happiness, sadness. The cycle of our days and years, the cycle of our lives and the cycle of the world.

But in this vision from God that Isaiah offers, that cycle is broken. No more will there be weeping, no more will be sudden death, no more will people exploit others' work. The world will be changed and made new. As John wrote in the book of Revelation "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; [...] and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:16-17)

That's the vision of the future that Isaiah shared all those years ago. That's the vision of the future that we have today. God's kingdom come.

As we approach the end of one year, and the beginning of a new one, we can occupy ourselves with longing for the good old days or we can, in faith, embrace the future that God has in store for us. The kingdom that Jesus declared was at hand at the beginning of his ministry, will be ultimately fulfilled. God's kingdom come. Not as an out there metaphysical or spiritual possibility, but in space and in history. A world made good.

We heard in our gospel reading today part of the Olivet Discourse – when Jesus told his disciples about the future and what it would hold for them. "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven." (Luke 21:10-11)

People often take those words to be about 'the end of the world', but Jesus is describing the present. The present for his disciples then, the present for us now. Nation rising against nation, earthquakes, famines, pestilences... they're the things of the nightly news, aren't they?

But in the context of those things, Jesus is clear, he warns his disciples "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them" (Luke 21:8). And then he encourages them: "For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict." (Luke 21:15) and he gives them an assurance: "Everyone will hate you because of me. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life." (Luke 21:18-19)

The that's the life, the future, that Isaiah wrote about, that's the life that Jesus would die and rise again to open up for us, just a few days later. God's kingdom come.

So here we are today. In the present. What will we do today? What will we do tomorrow? Will we try in vain to restore the past? Will we spend our time lamenting what has happened to us since those 'good old days'? Or will we work towards the coming of God's kingdom – sharing the good news of Jesus, and caring for our neighbours, maybe even in ways that we didn't know about or didn't dream of in those good old days?

And if we choose to work towards God's kingdom, do we try to do it all on our own, or do we trust God to guide us, equip us and empower us?

Here we are today. And in whatever we may face today – or tomorrow – let's remember the words of the prophet Jeremiah (31:31,33-34):

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people [...] I will be their God, and they will be my people. [...] they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,"

Friends: That is our future: God's kingdom come.

Amen.