

Isaiah 2. 1-5
Psalm 122 -
Romans 13. 11-14
Matthew 24. 36-44

In 2004 Don Watson – the speech writer for former Prime Minister Paul Keating – released a book entitled *Weasel Words*, a sort of double-speak dictionary was trying to highlight and, if possible, counteract the hijacking of our language by meaningless management speak. Weasel words numb the brain, cause the eyes to glaze over and veil the possibility that something malicious or incompetent is about to be bestowed on us. The most hideous example of this was the term *ethnic cleansing* – a term used to veil genocide during the Balkans war in the 1990s. Here's a quote from the chair of the Australian Government's National Literacy Review about children's education: ... *some children are not getting onto a growth trajectory as early as they should in terms of literacy*. Education as a growth trajectory?

A phrase which has come to irritate me profoundly in the last decade is the expression beloved of politicians and some pretending to community leadership when something they have devised or are rolling out is – *in the future going forward*. ... *at the end of the day in the future we will be achieving our goals going forward*. It is as though they have to qualify that they will not be doing whatever it is that they have planned in the past, but in the future. And as a rider, a qualification of what they are proposing, this initiative will be going forward. Not backwards; forwards. What does this mean – my little mind asks. It is as though it's almost sentence filler.

This *going forward* is of course a nod to the great ethic of our time – progress. We are going forward – we are committed to progress; to continuous incremental improvement. Growth, growth, growth. In truth our whole lives are caught up in an orientation of progress toward the future – this is the contemporary purpose of our lives; our *raison d'être*; our reason for being.

Except when we can't be caught up in this, brought about by some aspect of what it simply means to be human. The unimpeded progress into the future going forward comes to a halt: the punctuation in our lives grief creates; a debilitating chronic illness; a disability of some kind; some life event that lays us low and we lose our ability to forge ahead and produce and perform. And we find ourselves facing some voice of self-condemnation lodged inside us that we are of less worth, maybe even no worth at all, because we can't be getting ahead. To say nothing of the kind of public rhetoric that might label us as leaners, not lifters.

As we begin Advent, we orient ourselves toward Christmas and the coming of the Christ, a horizon four weeks away. But many of our readings through Advent orient us to a much more distant horizon – a kind of cosmic ending that many of us struggle to make sense of.

*In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house*

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

These far distant anticipations are something of an affront to our own projects of getting ahead, how dare someone suggest God might bring all this to a halt. Didn't God get the memo about progress? Of course, this mindset is behind our inability to face the looming cliff which is the climate crisis. How dare anyone suggest that the progress project has to be rethought?

The American farmer-poet Wendell Berry writes about the future and what he says is a misguided faith in it as a result in our belief in unimpeded progress.

The higher aims of "technological progress" are money and ease. And this exalted greed for money and ease is disguised and justified by an obscure, cultish faith in "the future." We do as we do, we say, "for the sake of the future" or "to make a better future for our children." How we can hope to make a good future by doing badly in the present, we do not say. We cannot think about the future, of course, for the future does not exist: the existence of the future is an article of faith. We can be assured only that, if there is to be a future, the good of it is already implicit in the good things of the present. We do not need to plan or devise a "world of the future"; if we take care of the world of the present, the future will have received full justice from us. A good future is implicit in the soils, forests, grasslands, marshes, deserts, mountains, rivers, lakes, and oceans that we have now, and in the good things of human culture that we have now; the only valid "futurology" available to us is to take care of those things. We have no need to contrive and dabble at "the future of the human race"; we have the same pressing need that we have always had—to love, care for, and teach our children.

Wendell Berry, *Feminism, the Body and the Machine*.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we give our attention to the distinctiveness of Christian hope. In the kind of hoping for progress into the future going forward, we are inducted in the first world into a form of desire we carry deep within us about what life will look like for us. We can see this in the bristling sense of entitlement we see around us. And we come up against it in ourselves when things don't go according to plan.

I find it helpful to think about Christian hope in the way in which Paul talks of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul concludes that passage saying that *these three remain, faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love*. The way Paul describes love is as character; love expresses itself in human being and relationship. It's not a work but a way of being. Are hope and faith like this, I ask myself? I think they are. Faith in biblical terms is a faithfulness toward – in Jesus' life death and resurrection, toward God. In marriage it is toward the one to whom we pledge our troth - not about what we don't do but in our character toward our beloved. So, hope is about character – not about hoping for some-thing, some outcome. Hope is about our character in the face of difficulty.

The hope that lies within both the passage from Isaiah and the Psalm express a hopeful orientation toward the God who seeks peace and prosperity for all people. Mount Zion, the centre of worship of the God of Jacob, is iconic of God's hope for all people:

*peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;*

*that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'*

And Paul writing to the Christians in Rome implores them to not descend into hopelessness but to be watchful and awake – a metaphor for consciousness and authenticity in living.

No question the apocalyptic passages we read from the New Testament through Advent are challenging. While we all live with the closeness of our own personal horizons, our own mortality as well as that economy of progress imposed upon us, it is difficult to be serious about the kind of cosmic apocalyptic horizon present in the Gospels and the other New testament writings.

Nevertheless, Jesus' injunction is towards a hopefulness in living, oriented toward God. It is a call to hopefulness as character which is able to be present to the immediate challenges of our lives and yet through hope transcend them. This is made possible by finding ourselves inhabiting God's economy of grace; a good place to be.

May this be the gift of grace to us this Advent.

Andrew Boyle