



Luke 4:16-21

**John Sargeant in "Strictly Come Dancing"
Daniel Evans in "The X Factor"**

Brits love underdogs and no-hopers ... but don't like being one themselves!

In the past decade the UK has led the developed world in the pursuit of wealth. At the same time, there has been an exodus of people from the church particularly in Western Europe. When you can heaven now why wait? Who needs God when we're safe and secure; when there are what seems more important and more exciting things to do in life. God has not been seen as relevant. We are in a success and self promoting society. People wanted more and the financial system made it possible.

And then we know what happened. Our society has been built on credit and on greed - and the financial collapse of our countries and others affects us all in some way or other.

And as people are looking forward to a "Merry Christmas" - it isn't going to be merry . People are being made redundant by the thousands every week, home repossessions are up. There's plenty of fear and not much hope.

Maybe that's your experience this morning if your job is under threat, or your family is affected by it, or you fear your finances are going to be difficult as you try to pay for Christmas.

And even if we are not so personally affected by it, we're going to know people that are.

The trouble is that when people are not just financially in debt, but are spiritually in debt as well. Jesus once said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Why, because when people are successful and prosperous, they don't feel they need God or haven't got time for Him. Sadly that has been the experience of Christians who in the last decade have slipped away from the church nationally - and usually it's been the under 50s. The pattern's been much the same here.

We live in a society that has been living on spiritual credit. People leave thinking about the future, about death and about eternity to another day. But like real credit, the price eventually has to be paid in full. And the crisis comes when people realise that God is distant.

Gloomy isn't it? But we're not here to be gloomy. This sermon is called Advent Hope. What is the Christian message? It isn't one of fear and worry, it's one of hope as we celebrate again a God who burst into this world in the person of His Son - Jesus Christ.

It's not a message of gloom and doom - but of hope. In the passage we read in Luke Jesus gives us His manifesto so to speak. They were not new words, but old ones -

words already written by Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah 61). It's rather like our game earlier. In a world of fear and poverty and hurting and suffering - Jesus makes the picture clear as to what God's view is about it:

8 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed 19 and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."

The Lord has come to save His people. But more than that - He came to make a difference to people's lives. He did that in His own time, and if we would open our eyes we find that He is still doing that to people's lives today. In some cases He's literally doing the things He said in people's lives.

Some of the turmoil in India in recent years has been caused because the poorest people in India have started to become Christian in their droves and Jesus words are literally good news to the poor, freedom for those who have been locked into the Hindu social system that kept them poor, oppressed then and robbed them of dignity. It's interesting that Hindu theology has no word or concept of hope whereas in Christ hope is so central.

Look around and you'll hear stories of people healed. And when people are not captives to others but captive to compulsions and addictions, Jesus makes a difference in their lives. Just because it doesn't happen in Felixstowe much doesn't mean that it doesn't happen much elsewhere - quite the contrary - Christianity is the world's fastest growing faith including countries where it is discourage or oppressed.

Is that our hope this morning? Or are we living with fears and anxieties about the world and God?

Advent is a season of hope and reminds us that god brings hope. It's a hope that should make a difference in our lives as believers. And it's that hope we need to bring to others in this season. God loves men and women and can really make a difference in their lives through Christ - a dynamic difference, a liberating difference, an eternal difference.

In less than two weeks we commence our Christmas activities. They are activities that we are inviting people to. Who's going to come? Some will be people who have a limited interest in the Christian faith who want to find out more. That's great - let's welcome them and show in our actions as well as our words that Jesus came to bring hope - hope now and hope forever. That's even more poignant when we live through times of fear in our society. Jesus came to replace fear with hope.

But there will be those who have been associated with this church in the past and who come at special times of the year. Let's welcome them and help them to understand that God still loves them as enthusiastically as ever and express that in our words and deeds. I say the same for them - Jesus came to replace fear with hope.

My sermons and talks for this Christmas are all going to be around the theme of "Encounter with God". My desire and I'm sure as a church our desire is that the people - as well as ourselves - have a living encounter with the living God as the people in the first Christmas did. Let's see fear replaced with hope in our lives and the lives of others as we encounter the Jesus who is no longer a baby but a living Lord.

Tonight we are going to be praying for the things we do over Christmas - that we might bring hope. If you can make it please come. If you can't but have someone you pray for regularly or maybe you care about that need an injection of hope this Christmas and need an encounter with the Living Lord - whether they are believers or not, please fill out a slip of paper with their name on and any other details you'd

like to put and put it in the basket at the front or upstairs as you leave and we'll collect them and pray for them tonight and over the coming weeks.

Prayer for them

There's one last thing I'd like to do. I said a few moments ago that as the people of God we are people of hope, not of fear. Are you fearful this morning? Come and let someone pray for you that God will fill you afresh with hope and deal with what causes your fears and anxieties.

Let's look at the words of Jesus again.

8 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed 19 and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."

Jesus is no longer with us physically, by through His Holy Spirit He lives in each believer. Therefore what applied to Him applies to us as his voice, his hands, his feet to the world. He brought hope - we bring hope to this world as well. Then pray that God will make us this:

8 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon US, because he has chosen US to bring good news to the poor. He has sent US to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed 19 and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."