

Dear Friends

Last Wednesday Trish and I tuned into CNN to watch the inauguration of the new American president. It always happens on what seem to be bitterly cold days in January and you could see everyone was well wrapped up and nearly everyone was wearing a face mask too. There were many memorable moments in this ceremony including their national anthem that was sung by Lady Gaga but the stand-out moment for me and many people was the performance of an original poem by the young poet laureate Amanda Gorman, titled, 'The Hill we climb'.

It begins like this.

'When day comes, we ask ourselves where can we find light in this never ending shade?

The loss we carry, a sea we must wade.'

This seemed like a good description of the season we are living through at the moment and the sense of loss we all carry. Perhaps it's the grey days that seem endless at this time of year but the additional loss of so many things that are familiar and the loss of people we have loved and know may weigh especially hard at the moment.

The night before the inauguration the new president and vice president led an act of remembering by the reflecting pool close to the Washington Monument for the 400,000 Americans who have lost their lives to Coronavirus. It was a simple ceremony during which a nurse sang Amazing Grace. In biblical language this was a moment of lament, of grieving, of love and of hope woven together. It reminded me of the words of Lamentations that come from a moment in history when the author was grieving for the loss of all he knew.

'But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.'

At some point I hope that the leaders of our nation will find a way of remembering the nearly 100,000 people who have died from coronavirus here with a similar dignity and respect as happened in the USA. It would be a moment when poetry and song would be helpful.

Later in her poem Amanda Gorman alludes to scripture and says

'Scripture teaches us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid.'

This is a more or less direct quote from the Prophet Micah. (4 vs 4) When I moved to London many years ago, I was amazed to discover people with Fig trees in their garden. Fig trees are beautiful and although it's not my favourite fruit these trees were fruitful. I also discovered that there were two vines growing in the garden that needed training and pruning every year and that these were also fruitful, late in the year they would bear small juicy red grapes. It was a wonder to me. Although Figs and Grapes may not be common fruit in our cold climate it's not difficult to see why Vines and Fig trees would be a sign of health, well being and security.

In John's gospel (John 1 vs 43-51) Jesus greets Nathaniel as a true son of Israel by saying he saw him while he was seated beneath the fig tree. This is no accident. No doubt Nathaniel was seated beneath a fig tree but like many things in John's gospel the reading functions at two levels. Nathaniel is a sign of the Kingdom of God. There's more to be said about Nathaniel in the preaching this week but for the moment he is a welcome sign of Shalom. He is a sign of peace and that's another theme that Amanda Gorman explores in her poem.

Of course, we need to be aware that she is writing after the attack on the American Congress which highlighted some of the deep divisions in her nation but we can also be mindful of the things that divide people from each other in our own.

She wrote.

'And so, we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms so we can reach out arms to one another.

We seek harm to none and harmony for all.

Let the globe if nothing else say this is true:

That even as we grieved, we grew.

That even as we hurt, we hoped.

That even as we tired, we tried.

That well forever be tied together, victorious.

Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow division.

Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid'

There is much hope and wisdom in her words and while we could dismiss this as mere idealism, it's a vision which shares much in common with Micha's vision of peace. Seeking peace doesn't mean surrendering our convictions or abandoning our identity. It does mean a willingness to find the common ground and recognise that as Jo Cox, the late M.P. for Batley and Spennings said 'We have more in common than that which divides us.'

If you would like to read the whole text of the poem you can find it at

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/20/amanda-gorman-poem...>

If you would like to watch the performance of the poem you can follow this link

<https://youtu.be/Wz4YuEvJ3y4>

Her poem concludes with these lines which reminds me that the light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness has never extinguished it. May our light shine as shine as we shine with the light of Christ.

'For there is always light

If only we are brave enough to see it.

If only we are brave enough to be it.'

God bless

Your friend and pastor

Mark