Message for St Paul's in the Park

Date: 1st of November, 2026

Theme: Hope

Preacher: Rev'd Gareth Walters

Readings: Isaiah 7 / Isaiah 9 / John 1

Title: *'Waiting, Watching, Hoping…'*

Thank you so much, Rev. Warner—and to you all - for the privilege of being able to come and share with you this morning. It was so good to be part of the evening celebration of Rev. Warner's ministry - across almost forty years—29 of them as King's chaplain and over eight years here as Vicar of St. Paul's. As I said on that occasion, Warns: your love and energy for building God's Kingdom here in this corner of Auckland, here in Ormiston, is a spur to me and an encouragement to many.

Well, speaking of 'Kingdom-building', the attention of an entire nation is well and truly focused on the outcome of next week's General Election—though *which* 'kingdom' is being built by some parties is anybody's guess! Now, while I'm not here to comment on which party or politician you should vote for, I would hazard a guess that most of us are nervously 'watching, waiting, and hoping' for an outcome that reflects God's priorities and brings good news to everyone.

As I've listened to talk-back radio while driving around Auckland's busy streets, I hear people contending that our 'hopes' for a better future as a country will be found by finding the 'silver bullet', answering the 'million dollar question'. Some hope for an outcome that will 'balance the books'. Some hope for a remedy that will reduce the cost of living. Some hope for a solution that will reduce house prices. Some hope for assistance for those in poverty, relief for our health system, job creation, protection for the environment, honouring the Treaty…; an outcome that unites, rather than divides…The list goes on…

To say there are a lot of 'hopes' riding on this election is the understatement of the century.

But my point is - 'Watching, waiting, hoping' that things will be different can be a fraught and troubling experience, can't it? Whether it involves politics, climate change, geopolitical tensions, or the advent of Artificial Intelligence,

there is a lot of uncertainty about how our future and all these ‘issues’ are going to play out…

And I think it’s fair to say, that even more angst can swirl about us in the day-to-day, personal details of our lives—whether it’s a diagnosis that robs us of health, a job that causes more trouble than it’s worth, or a relationship with a family member that simply drives us up the wall.

All these things can leave us ‘watching, waiting, and hoping’ that things will change for the better.

Deep down, we all need hope. It is core to what it means to be human. American poet Emily Dickinson captures this beautifully when she writes:

"Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul – and sings the tune without the words – and never stops at all."

The question, of course, is: **What do we mean by ‘hope’?**

The Oxford Dictionary, for one, defines it as *"a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen."* An example they offer is: *"I had high hopes of making it into the Olympic Sprint Team."* (Not a particularly universal example, I might add... There was good reason why I was known as ‘Walters the Tortoise’ back in school!)

The problem though, I think, with this dictionary definition of hope is that it sounds more like wishful thinking than anything reliable enough to pin our lives on.

To help us find a definition that is far more helpful for us as followers of Jesus, we would do well instead to the Hebrew Scriptures. Here, in the Old Testament, the word for ‘hope’ ***tiqvah*** appears more than 140 times and literally means a **'cord'** or a **'rope'**—a physical attachment that we tie things to.

If this is a more accurate definition of ‘hope’ the question then becomes: ***What are you and I tying our hope to?*** What have we lashed ourselves our hope to — a relationship, a job, retirement, or a political outcome? And more precisely, is it something reliable enough to truly bear that weight?

Now, I am certainly not advocating that we throw up our hands and give up on our concern and working for the good of our families, cities, and nation. Of course not. The Prophet Jeremiah—speaking to the people of Israel exiled in Babylon in the 6th century BC—tells them:

“…build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children... Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where you were sent into exile... Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare determines your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:4–7)

But as we do these things, we need to keep in mind – upon what and on who - have we set our ultimate hope on. See the truth is, we often attach our hopes, good as they are, to people and things that are essentially fallible and are at risk of failing to live up to our expectations. As one wise person noted, *"Having expectations is like having a house of disappointment under construction."* You see, creaturely things can never deliver on the ultimate expectations we place on them.

And this risk applies just as much to those of us in the Church, too. Growing up in the 1970s and 80s, I absorbed a bit of a ‘Hollywood ideal’ of faith. I heard countless messages telling me that God had a good, perfect plan for my life, almost as if nothing unpleasant or challenging would ever happen to me. My ‘hope’ in Jesus was supposed to cocoon me from all the hard things that everyone else went through.

But when my parents’ marriage started to painfully unravel, I couldn’t understand where God was. Why was it, the more I prayed, the worse things seemed to get…?

It was at a retreat day, led by Joyce Hugget – author of *Listening to God* that helped me come to realize that my hope had become lashed to a *particular outcome* rather than to *God Himself*. Jesus never promised His disciples a life of ease free from suffering. We would have trouble in this life…not of His making, but simply because we live in a fallen and broken world… But Jesus’ promise is that He would never leave us nor forsake us in the midst of it. Because of Christ’s own suffering, His death and Resurrection, Jesus reminds us that this is not all there is – and that there is a certain hope we can look forward to - prepared for those who put their trust in Him.

Beyond next week’s election lies the season of **Advent**—a season pointing to a very different kind of ‘hope’ that the world has on offer. Advent invites us to listen to voices that, in their own day, were outsiders: prophets, these weird mystics, who carried a deep sense of hope undimmed by life’s troubles. Their hope was not centred on fallible, temporal things, but would rest on a future promise - made through the birth of a child—a child born to be King.

Like ours, their world was uncertain at best and bleak at worst. The darkness in Judah had been born out of a split between Israel in the north and Judah in the south—entangled in the regional power plays of Assyria and Egypt. Faith in the God of Creation had waned under apostate leadership, like King Ahaz, leaving those who sought to follow Yahweh crying out for deliverance.

Yet into this political turmoil, seven hundred years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a hope arriving in the shape of a child: the Messiah (*mashiach*—the Anointed One). This child would bring God's divine, eternal presence into our midst forever. Isaiah proclaimed:

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel—which means 'God with us.'" (Isaiah 7:14)

Through this Messiah, a new dawn would break. Like someone searching for keys in the pitch dark to unlock a door, this child would light up our world, showing us how to live—and ultimately showing us the way home:

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:2, 6)

Looking around the world two thousand years later, we might ask: *How has this been fulfilled? Where is this peaceful reign? Where is the hope we long for?*

The hope Isaiah spoke of would arrive not as a military conquest, but as a tiny baby in a stable. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the Magi encountered One who would not establish an empire by force or political manoeuvring, but One who would be the hope of the world by changing us from the inside out. He came to show us what God is like and what His Kingdom is like, inviting us to open the door of our lives so His Spirit might change us and by implication - the world around us…

Christian author Adrian Plass captures this reality well in his book '*Clearing Away the Rubbish'*:

"One of the greatest barriers to prayer in my life has been an obsession with self-image. I never wanted to let God in through the front door of my life until I'd tidied up all the messes, done the washing-up, cleaned the windows and made the beds. Never realizing how gladly and joyfully he

would have come in, rolled his sleeves up and given me a hand, I kept him waiting outside while I tried to do an impossibly perfect job on my own. Ironically, it wasn't until I hit rock-bottom a few years ago that I realized how all that stuff about God loving me whatever happened was true. In the darkest and most difficult times Jesus was there... Nowadays, I tend to leave the door on the latch."

Jesus comes to enter the raw, messy reality of our lives. Like a tiny mustard seed or yeast working through dough, His love changes us from within, guiding us toward true life and real hope.

But the question remains, '*How do we keep our hope alive?'*

We keep our hope alive by fixing our eyes on Jesus, the *"author and perfecter of our faith"* (Hebrews 12:2). It is Jesus who is the pioneer (*archēgos*) of our faith who invites us to participate in His Life, and Jesus is the one (*teleiotēs*) who will ultimately complete our faith, preparing us for what is to come…

As the words of an old Baptist chorus reminds us to do moment by moment '*Turn your eyes on Jesus and look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace*.'

You see, it is Jesus is who is our hope, our light — here and for the life to come. So let us take heart, no matter what unfolds next week in the elections or in the years ahead. Let us keep our eyes firmly fixed on Him as we reflect His light and life in a world of need and challenge…

As C.S. Lewis famously said to a nation facing the uncertainty of an unfolding Cold War, living under the long-shadow of a nuclear arms' race:

"The first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb, when it comes, find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs."

We can live with that kind of calm, steady presence when our ultimate hope is anchored securely in Christ. Amen.