

Sermon for Sunday 6 December 2020 – Second Sunday of Advent

God comforts his people

Readings: Isaiah 40: 1-11 and Mark 1: 1-8

Good morning on this Second Sunday of Advent as we prepare for the coming of Jesus – at Christmas and when he comes again to reign as King of heaven and earth.

Traditionally on this Sunday we remember the prophets who spoke God's messages to his people. Recently we studied the writings of the prophet Amos in our online services and learned what a difficult job he had in calling the people of Judah to repentance, to justice and to true worship of God. Today our first reading comes from one of the greatest prophets of all – Isaiah – who lived and began to prophesy around the same time as Amos.

About the first two thirds of the book of Isaiah is taken up with warnings to the people of Judah that God would punish them if they continued to rely on unholy alliances with other countries. He called them to obey God, to rely on God, and to worship him with their whole hearts, not satisfy themselves with meaningless ceremonies and rituals which God despised.

Isaiah started to preach around 740BC and scholars are divided whether the same prophet wrote all of the book of Isaiah or whether there were two or more writers. Despite Isaiah's warnings, God's punishment was finally enacted on the people of Judah when they were taken into exile in Babylon and the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 587BC.

As I said earlier, many of Isaiah's prophecies were dire warnings but, by the time we reach chapter 40 and today's first reading, we see a different tone emerging. Isaiah speaks God's words of comfort to his people. These words would have been a soothing balm to the people of Judah who were stressed, exhausted and demoralized by

decades of exile in a strange land and they would have welcomed the assurance of God's comfort and mercy.

In our day we too are living through a time of turmoil and many of us are feeling stressed, exhausted and demoralized in what seems like an exile in a strange land. We too can count on God's comfort and mercy.

What does the word 'comfort' mean to us? A cosy sofa or chair, a time of relaxation and ease, a warm home? Well yes it means all of those things but God's comfort isn't about ease and cosiness but, I would like to suggest, has two specific meanings.

God's comfort, for the people of Judah and for us, brings **consolation**. There is a sense of tenderness in Isaiah's prophecy as he talks of God as being a shepherd who leads his flock, gently carrying the young lambs and leading their mothers. This prophecy was eventually fulfilled in full in the person of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

But comfort also has another meaning – **giving strength** – from the Latin *com fortis*. There is a section of the Bayeux Tapestry which depicts the Norman bishop Odo strengthening the Norman troops. He's not just speaking encouraging words but is standing behind the soldiers armed with a cudgel. Well as a priest and bishop he wasn't allowed to carry a sword so a cudgel had to suffice! It's a good job that ministers don't carry a cudgel around with them today. A cudgel is definitely not a tool to encourage us in worship or to take on a pastoral visit!

Isaiah assures the people of Judah, and us, that while God gives us strength, he assures us of rough places being made plain and winding roads becoming straight. A highway would appear in the wilderness for God to show his glory.

Eventually the people of Judah were consoled and strengthened and they were restored to their homeland. This restoration was brought about through an unlikely agent – a heathen king - Cyrus of Persia who defeated the Babylonians and allowed the people of Judah to return to their land in 539BC. Isaiah’s prophecies were fulfilled as the returning exiles rebuilt their country, the capital city of Jerusalem and the Temple where, once more, God would be at the centre of their attention and their worship.

Our second reading from Mark’s gospel features John the Baptist quoting words from Isaiah 40 verse 3 ‘a voice of one calling in the desert, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him”’.

Here was John, the last of the Old Testament-style prophets, calling on the people to repent, much as Isaiah had done, and beginning his work in the desert. A desert doesn’t sound like an auspicious place to minister but it’s a place of quiet and a refuge from the clamour of a noisy world. Like many of the prophets before him such as Moses and Elijah, John began in a place where he, and the people he was speaking to, could come, hear God’s word and repent.

And the people of Judah responded wholeheartedly.

Verse 5 tells us that ‘The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan’. What an amazing impact John’s call to repentance had in so many lives being turned around! Here was the highway in the wilderness prophesied by Isaiah – a highway for God to show his glory.

But John the Baptist wasn’t the end of the story. His role was to be a herald and a signpost to Jesus, the coming King. John baptized with water, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Like the people of Judah, we are called in our own day to repent and turn to God, not to rely on the way of the world. We are called to put our faith and trust in the all-powerful God who was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the people of Israel and Judah, the God of the early church and the God of this present age – by putting our trust in Jesus the good shepherd.

Through our relationship with Jesus and the gifting of the Holy Spirit we can experience God's comfort – his tender consolation in troubled times and his strengthening and empowering.

In the communion service from the Book of Common Prayer, there are some words of comfort that follow the confession and absolution. They are known as the 'comfortable words' and they begin:

"Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.

Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you"

These comfortable words continue by assuring us that, when we repent we receive God's forgiveness because of Jesus' death on the cross and remind us that Jesus continues to advocate for us.

The comfortable words end with the exhortation 'Lift up your hearts' and the congregation is invited to respond 'We lift them up unto the Lord'

In these dark and difficult days of the Covid 19 pandemic, which are giving us a raw experience of the desert, let's lift our eyes and our hearts to the coming King who consoles and strengthens us.

Lift up your hearts – we lift them up unto the Lord.