

Second Sunday of Advent, Year B

Isaiah 40.1-11, 2 Peter 3.8-15a, Mark 1.1-8

Well, if last Sunday's passages were about waiting, then today's are about preparation. And this morning we are going to look at another passage in Isaiah. I suggest that you open your bible to Isaiah 40 because you may want to refer to it as we go through.

Due to the vagaries of the Church Lectionary, we have gone backwards in Isaiah. Last week we looked at chapter 64; this week it's chapter 40. Scholars tell us that Isaiah 64 was likely written in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, after the exile in Babylon. Whereas Isaiah 40 is addressed to the exiles while they are still in Babylon.

These eleven verses are carefully put together with five sections that form a sandwich.

The bread of the sandwich is verses one and two, echoed by verses ten and 11, or at least by verse 11. Verses one and two are spoken by God and verses 10 and 11 are Isaiah's commentary. Because we have only ten minutes, I am going to set aside consideration of verse ten as scholars are uncertain as to what is meant by reward and recompense. I'm going to park this, and you can investigate it later if you wish.

But the bread of our sandwich in Isaiah today is comfort. In verses one and two God commands that words of comfort are spoken to the exiles in Babylon. They have been through some horrific times and are now in exile in a strange land among strange people. Maybe they even feel abandoned by God.

So, although God feels obliged to discipline his people, his heart is tender towards them. He has not abandoned them. Even as they endure hard times, he reassures them that he loves them, cares for them and intends to rescue them.

This is reinforced in verse 11:

He tends his flock like a shepherd:

*He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;*

he gently leads those that have young.

God the Good Shepherd. That is who he is. Tenderness and care are his characteristics as he comes to rescue his people.

And God as the Good Shepherd has universal application. *The Lord is my shepherd* wrote David. *Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted* Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:4)

And of course, everyone is an exile from God at some point. Everyone goes astray. Everyone needs God's tender comfort at some time in their lives. Is that us today? Do we feel a little estranged from God, abandoned by him even; perhaps feeling that he is unhappy with us in some way, or disciplining us?

If that's you, be comforted. His heart for us is that of the Good Shepherd. Come to him, let him take you into his loving, forgiving protective arms; lean in close to his heart. Feel his heartbeat of love for you.

Verses three to nine in this passage have three voices which make up the triple filling in the sandwich.

So, whose are these voices?

The first one in verses three to five - a voice crying in the wilderness – is obvious. Because Mark spells out that it is John the Baptist. And verse four is explicit about preparing the way for the LORD.

And we can picture it, can't we? A straight road. Valleys lifted up, mountains brought down, and rough ground made smooth.

This image would probably have been familiar to Isaiah's hearers in days when there were no national highways.

So, when a king intended to travel to visit his territories, and particularly in a victory parade, a road would be constructed for him just the way Isaiah describes, filling in valleys, lowering mountains, making the way easier.

And note where Isaiah says the highway will be made – in the wilderness, the dry place devoid of much life. Even in a dry land, a dry time, the Lord wants a way to be made for him. He wants it to be easy for him to come. With love and not judgement.

John the Baptist interprets how to prepare the way. It is through holiness; by confession and repentance leading to forgiveness. And holiness through baptism in Holy Spirit so as actually to be holy, a step beyond a cycle of repeated failure, confession, and repentance.

Isaiah would not have been surprised if he heard John speak. In Isaiah 35, in a prophecy about the arrival of God's kingdom, Isaiah says that *a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness... but only the redeemed will walk there*. Interesting.

We should not be surprised either. How can we expect to welcome King Jesus, the Lord Almighty, appropriately, as is his due, if we are not holy as he is holy, as Peter says in today's epistle?

The next voice, in verses six to eight is God's. At first sight it is confusing, contradictory even. All people are like grass - their faithfulness is like flowers – grass withers, flowers fall – because God's breath does away with them.

So, what's happened to comfort? It's in the next phrase. Grass, flowers, faithlessness are descriptions of our natural state. We are fickle, faithless creatures. We are entirely unable to save ourselves. We may try but our efforts fail, just like grass and flowers do before the end of the year. We need to be new creations, new flowers.

BUT the word of our God endures forever. We may be faithless, but God is faithful. His word stands. His word of comfort, that sin has been paid for, that holiness is possible, that the king is coming for us, first at Calvary, then in our hearts and then again at Jesus's second coming still applies.

The final voice in verse nine is not one voice but many. It is our voice. We are the ones who are to bring good news to Zion, to Jerusalem.

What, we may ask, has Zion, has Jerusalem, to do with us, other than that the church is the New Jerusalem in embryo (Revelation 21:2)? Well, yes, that's the point. The New Jerusalem is incomplete. We are to proclaim the good news of comfort to potential new citizens of that city. And see how we are to do it, verse 9.

- From *a high mountain* - publicly, unequivocally
- Loudly – *lift up your voice with a shout*
- Without fear – *do not be afraid*

Oh, how Isaiah knew what we are like! If we share the good news at all it tends to be tentatively, done in a corner, in a whisper, isn't it?

But to prepare the way for the coming King properly is to proclaim his coming boldly.

We need to find ways to do that – perhaps discover them together – which will get the message across without jeopardising future opportunities to share. Ways that will instead raise valleys, lower mountains, and remove obstacles, smoothing the way for the glory of the Lord to be seen in our community.

So, these verses are about preparing the way for the Good Shepherd, the God of all Comfort, for him to come.

- to come first to us as we look towards the baby coming to Bethlehem and all that means
- second, to prepare ourselves to meet him on his return at his second coming, and
- Third, to prepare the way for our community to see the King whom they do not currently recognise.

And how we are to prepare is

- through confession and repentance for forgiveness, and
- through holiness, as Peter says, by walking in the Holy Spirit
- and by public, loud, and bold declaration.

Preparation and declaration; two words for us today as we think of John the Baptist.

Let us do it. Let us prepare to see the glory of the LORD revealed, in us and through us. Amen

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