

Advent 2

Isaiah 40: 1-11 , Luke 1:1-25

Mother Emma Dinwiddy-Smith

The opening verse of our reading from Isaiah chapter 40, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God" almost certainly conjures up nostalgic images of the approach of Christmas, alongside the haunting opening of Handel's Messiah, which many of us will come to hear performed by our choir next Sunday afternoon.

Isaiah's prophecy is addressed to the exiled people of Israel, urging them both to be comforted by the knowledge that the Lord is coming, and to share that hope and promise with others.

I remember being amused by a theologian who once wrote that she had grown up believing that these words were in fact, "Come for tea, come for tea, my people, saith your God." The image did indeed touch her with comfort and with a vision of the tender, generous love of God, but in a rather more genteel way than Isaiah had in mind.

There is nothing genteel or understated about Isaiah's exhortation to God's people. It is difficult to convey in English that the opening encouragement to comfort is originally written in the plural. Modern versions which say simply "Comfort my people" can sound as though Isaiah is comforting them, and as though it is his sole responsibility to go and offer hope to Jerusalem.

The Authorised Version we use at Matins conveys the plural with "Comfort ye", but again, to modern ears, this might mean that we should comfort ourselves, or simply one another.

In fact, it is a rousing, imperative cry to every one of us to shout out words of comfort to those around us, inspiring them with the hope and good news of God's coming.

Perhaps we are also confused by the singular used in speaking to Jerusalem, but Isaiah is using Zion and Jerusalem to speak of the people of God collectively, and if we understand ourselves as part of the new Jerusalem, the holy Church of God, we should not shrink from responding to the words:

"Get thee up into the high mountain... lift up thy voice with strength... lift it up, be not afraid and say, "Behold your God!""

A couple of weeks ago the Church Times published a review of a recent research report entitled, "Seeing ourselves as others see us: Perceptions of the Church of England."

The overwhelming majority of respondents regarded the Church of England with what he described as "benign indifference". The C of E was, he said "simply not associated with spiritual experience" – considerably more "come for tea" perhaps, than, "Behold your God!"

Pastoral and social outreach is, of course, a vital part of the Church's calling, and through it we reflect the abundant hospitality and generosity of Christ, but there are other organisations and faith communities and statutory bodies who work alongside us amongst the needy and the marginalized.

What is distinctive about the Church is its message of hope in God's love and power, and in the story of Jesus Christ's redemption of the world. We need to make clear that what we are doing here in Church on Sundays (or any other day!) is not "come for tea", but "behold your God!"

In a time of great suffering, doubt, confusion and exhaustion, we can offer a message of hope and strength.

In 1930, a similar time of foreboding and economic uncertainty, the spiritual writer, Evelyn Underhill, wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, "God is the interesting thing about religion and people are hungry for God."

Those of us who are marked out as "the faithful" by our distinctive outfits can tell you many stories of being stopped in the street, or quizzed by taxi drivers, hairdressers, agnostic friends or, indeed, those in need whom we seek to help, asking us to explain faith, or God, or some theologically related question.

It is easy for them to identify us, and we don't need to shout about it in order to make it clear we are fair game for a conversation about God. But perhaps those of you who come week by week to worship could let it slip at work, or amongst friends, or in the kind of settings I have mentioned, and you might be surprised at the curiosity and interest it arouses.

"Benign indifference" is a sad indictment of the way the Church of England is seen, but we have also moved on from the situation twenty or thirty years ago when people actively rebelled against what they saw as the restrictive teaching of the Church and were often aggressive or critical towards those who were seen as churchgoers.

A conversation about faith is now far less likely to provoke hostility, and if we can move it beyond benign indifference, by revealing the hope, the comfort and the strength we derive from our faith in God, we shall be answering Isaiah's call.

It has been said that those within the Church of England seem to spend more time complaining about what is wrong with the church than talking about the beliefs and hopes on which our faith is founded. As we approach this time of year, we as Christians are filled with hope and expectation at the coming of the Christchild at Christmas, and at the glory of the Lord which will ultimately be revealed, as Isaiah anticipates.

We have the opportunity to share our faith, not by criticizing the secular celebrations, but by emphasizing our own unique insight into Christmas joy. We hear and read a lot about fears that Christmas will once again be cancelled, and indeed, it is concerning that we may be separated from those we love or feel anxious about the risks of coming to worship at such a special time of year.

Yet for us Christmas can never truly be cancelled because the joy it brings, the glad tidings brought to the shepherds on the hillside above Bethlehem, will last a lifetime – and beyond into the joys of Heaven.

Difficult times do pass, even the fears and disappointments of our present age; our earthly lives, too, will eventually come to an end, but the promises of Advent encourage us to share with others that our hope and the promises of God are everlasting. As Isaiah assures us:

"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

Amen