

**Sunday 10 December 2023, Advent 2 Parish Eucharist**

**Isaiah 40. 1-11**

**The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

When I was a child, I was only allowed a very limited exposure to film and television. Among the films I was permitted to watch were a set of VHS tapes- the BBC adaptation of The Chronicles of Narnia which first aired in 1988. I still remember the cosy feeling brought on especially by The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. But there was something in the story that puzzled me as I grew older and that I think I'm only now beginning to understand. And that's the peculiar presence of Father Christmas.

You may recall that, as the White Witch's power begins to weaken, he returns to Narnia and gives the Pevensie children gifts- weapons to fight, a horn to cry for help, and a cordial for healing of any wound. Father Christmas prepares the children for battle. 'Peter was silent and solemn as he received [his] gifts, for he felt they were a very serious kind of present.' I've long pondered what's going on here, what the gifts mean, and why C.S. Lewis thought it so important that Father Christmas should be the one to give them. It occurs to me now, as an adult with at least some experience of life, that Lewis understood what I have begun to see myself, namely, the deep meaning of Christmas as divine warfare.

What do the prophecies of the coming Christ say? *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.*

Lewis has imbibed the martial tenor of Isaiah the prophet and understands Christmas as the beginning of a great battle, the final battle to end the long war of which we heard all the way back in the mists of time in Genesis chapter 3: *and I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.* Father Christmas comes before the battle, in the time we call Advent, the time of prophecy, to prepare the children for the beginning of the end of the long, long war. Thomas Cranmer beautifully captures this warlike mood in the Collect we pray every day during Advent:

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal. Put upon us the armour of light. Fit us, O Lord, to be soldiers faithful, true, and bold. Speak comfortably to us and cry that the ancient time of warfare is coming to an end. Hold before our longing eyes God's imminent victory in the birth of a tiny child who will grow into the warrior Son of Man. *Behold, he cometh with clouds;*

*and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen.*

We know already how the war ends. *Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.* The things that should not be will be taken away. The things that ought to be shall be brought forth. *He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm.* It all ends for us and for the universe in the apocalyptic dance of the angels and saints, the jubilant horn-blast of victory, the casting of crowns and the woes of the earth. The New Jerusalem descends! *And a little child shall lead them.* The prophetic Father Christmas comes to the hopeful children, to us, who hope beyond hope that the world might one day be what our hearts know it should be and he says, *Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.*

Your warfare is soon to come to an end, *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder.* Be strong, little ones. Be brave, dear ones. Take the armour of God, the sword of the Spirit, and the breastplate of salvation and make you ready for the final battle. Take this cordial, the sweet word of truth; it is for the healing of the nations. The serpent may strike the little boy's heel, but the man in his prime shall crush the serpent's head. 'All the winter of our sin, long and dark, is flying from his light, to whom we give laud and praise undying.' The beginning of the end comes to us in the bleak midwinter, in Advent. Soon, with the wail of a new-born baby, at midnight Mass on Christmas we will live the victory already accomplished, and with our very hands and eat and drink the end of God's warfare. Cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, so that you may be ready to meet him when he comes: soon and then in glory, not with a helpless cry but with a shout of command and the voice of the archangel!

*O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him. Amen.*