

8th December 2024, Advent 2, Matins

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

Mother Emma

It is hard to imagine a better advertisement for next Sunday evening's performance of the Christmas section of the Messiah – the prophets' foretelling of Christ's coming and his birth at Bethlehem – than our first reading from the prophecy of Isaiah today. I struggle to read many of the famous lines which C read to us without hearing Handel's wonderful settings in my head and his music instils into each of these wonderful prophecies the sense of comfort, hope and joy which Isaiah is offering to the exiled people in Israel, and which many also seek in our current world.

Isaiah was speaking to a people whose homeland had been conquered and occupied, and the sacred buildings at the heart of their faith had been torn down. To prevent their establishing a resistance and overthrowing their conquerors in return, all the able-bodied amongst them had been carried off, wholesale, into foreign countries, where one assumes they met with just as much rejection and prejudice as asylum seekers and refugees do today. And the prophets are brutally clear with them – they had sinned, turning away from the laws and love of God, and going their own way, worshipping false idols and mistreating others, failing to heed the prophets' warnings, and so precipitating their own downfall.

Yet God is a merciful God, and whilst he will act against his people to bring them to their senses, there will come a time when their penance is paid and God will pardon all their offences. *Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.* Now God will come with a strong hand, and yet with great tenderness, and he will once again cradle his people as a shepherd does with the lambs in his flock.

As Christians we hear in these lines not only the promise of a return to one's home experienced by the original exiled hearers in Babylon, but the coming of the Lord God with strength **and** tenderness both in the incarnate Christ at Bethlehem, and in his return in judgement at the end of time. For the exiles, there is no doubt that this was a powerful message of hope and peace. *"The prophets said you would bring peace and save your people in trouble"*, we prayed as we lit our second Advent candle at the start of this Eucharist this morning. In times of uncertainty and anxiety, we still cling to the reassurance offered by these well-known prophecies of peace and security which we hear time and again in the build-up to the Christmas feast.

At this time of year, possibly more than any other, many people find comfort and stability in familiar rituals, from watching children open the doors on their Advent calendars, to putting up the tree and the decorations, sending out cards, and giving time, thought and money to finding the perfect gift for those we love. What people expect of the Church at

this time of year is similarly conditioned by beautiful and timeless rituals which stay with us, joining the worship of our earliest childhood with our experiences as adults.

Many teenagers remember with affection their school Christingle service, when, as in our service for St Mary Abbots School last week, we sang of God's coming in a church lit only by the flickering lights of the candles in their orange Christingles. Adults too, speak of annual Advent services like the one here last Sunday evening, the awestruck experience in a candlelit Church of the familiar readings, the almost mystical beauty of the music and those glorious Advent hymns.

We rest secure in the belief that Christ will come to bring light out of darkness and peace out of trouble. Yet there is more to God's promises than a blanket of soothing encouragement. Isaiah is clear that it is only God who is eternal and powerful, and that it is only in listening to his teaching and following in his footsteps that we will find this peace for ourselves. *"Surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand for ever."*

We are reminded of our own mortality and frailty, but of the ultimate and eternal power of God. God calls us to turn to him, again and again, as we stumble around in our own weakness. Hundreds of years after the exile, God sends the mysterious and unsettling figure of John the Baptist, of whom we shall hear more next week, charged once again with turning the people from the sinful state into which they have returned. His father, Zechariah, is told by the angel Gabriel before his birth: *He shall be filled with the Holy Ghost ... and many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.* The message is clear – human beings, left to their own device, slip back again and again into sin, violence and chaos. The coming and the death of Christ the Redeemer opened the possibility of eternal forgiveness to all people, but only if they recognise their own failings and seek to follow him more nearly.

We live in a world which week by week and almost day by day feels more chaotic and uncertain. We see wars and political polarization raising their heads across the globe, and it is hard not to feel anxious and unsettled. The prophets' role was to shine light into the murky darkness of our human lives and societies, to reveal the suffering, the oppression, the pain and the injustice which exists all around us, and to call people to repentance and to action.

It is when we have truly acknowledged that the beauty and brightness of Advent light is likely to lay bare our own choices and those of the groupings and structures within which we live, and lead us to change our lives for the better, that we may come to share in that peace and rest which, for the prophets, is the outcome of seeing ourselves and the world as we truly are, and becoming as God intended us to be.

Amen