Sermon for 2nd in Advent Year B

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

i

After a lifetime of bad news, after 50 years or more of feeling that God had abandoned them, suddenly there is Good News at last! ‘Comfort my people, comfort my people’, are the opening words of Isaiah of Babylon. Jerusalem has been in ruins for nearly 50 years since the people went into Exile in 587BC – but now they are about to go home. Cyrus the Persian has defeated Babylon and his new policy is to allow the Jewish captives to go home. The year is 539BC.

The command to ‘Comfort my people’ picks up the desolation of the *Book of Lamentations* 1.2 which cries that Jerusalem is like a widow with no one to comfort her – an image of the ruined city at the start of the Babylonian Exile. Now there is comfort. It has nothing to do with Cyrus the Persian’s colonial policy that they are about to go home, although at the human level it is precisely that, but for Isaiah this is God’s work, proclaiming that the Judean exiles are still ‘my people’ and their time of punishment is now over. Her sins have now been paid for (40.2).

They have been metaphorically in the desert for a generation. Far from home, surrounded by the victorious gods of Babylon, the people have wept for Zion. Ezekiel, one of the earlier exiles from the first deportation in 597BC has long since had his vision of the dry bones in the desert coming back alive again with new sinew and skin as an image of future national resurrection. Now that vision is coming to fruition.

The desert is a scary place to be, for it is the place where devils and demons live. But it is also where angels can be called upon for help. It is the place for dramatic encounters between good and evil; it is a place where people’s loyalty and faith are tested. But now they are to cross the desert once more as they return home.

This return across the wilderness, rather than the more usual route between Babylon and Jerusalem **around** the wilderness is intended to represent a second Exodus. The first Exodus from the slavery of Egypt through the desert in Moses’ time did not end well. Now God is giving them a second chance. God will make their passage through the wilderness safe and speedy – as a metaphorical highway is established upon which the exiled Judeans can quickly return home.

This is not just a message for the exiled Jews – but something that all the world will see. Isaiah of Babylon picks up again the global reach of the covenant made with Abraham to be a blessing to all nations in Genesis 12.3. Suddenly, the people have been transformed from a nation of defeated slaves into the guiding light of the nations of the world. Suddenly, the once triumphant gods of Babylon are seen as no more than helpless lumps of wood strapped to the backs of donkeys (Isaiah 44.6-20 and chapters 45 & 46). Isaiah of Babylon speaks the first clearly monotheistic note of Judaism.

The transience of human endeavours is contrasted with the everlasting will of God. Empires such as that of Babylon will rise and fall, but God’s purposes will not be thwarted. Both good and bad, both flower and grass will pass away, both our mighty achievements and our gravest errors, are blown away by the breath of God declaring God’s word. Isaiah puts into perspective the things that loom so large in human affairs, the rise and fall of empires, the great achievements we make and the huge errors we would rather forget, all pass away and are as nothing when compared to the work of God’s mighty arm.

The Good News for the city of Zion is not, as one might have expected, ‘Rejoice, your relatives are coming home’, but rather, ‘Here is your God’. But this almighty conquering God before whom empires are ‘like a drop in a bucket or dust upon the scales’ (40.15), comes not as avenging general, but as gentle shepherd, carrying the most vulnerable, and keeping the flock together at the pace of the slowest which are those with suckling young.

ii

Mark’s gospel also starts in the wilderness. Again it is a place for discerning loyalty and faith. The river Jordan which marked the entry into the Promised Land at the end of the first Exodus now marks the entry into a new Promised Land through baptism in preparation for the kingdom of the imminent Messiah.

It appears that the second chance given when the people returned from exile in Babylon has ultimately run into the sand in the same way as the efforts following the initial Exodus. John the Baptist and later times of wilderness wanderings led by Jesus represent a third Exodus, but this time the kingdom to be established by Jesus is not to be found on any map, but will exist only as a spiritual kingdom.

John makes the people come out to him. They have to be committed enough to make the difficult journey from the city to hear him in the wilderness. John the Baptist sounds like a throw-back to the diatribes of the pre-exilic prophets who harangued the crowds for the sins, urging them to repent. He seems a long way from the ‘Comfort my people’ ministry of Isaiah of Babylon. But in the verses that follow today’s reading from Mark 1:1-8 we would discover that this raging, fiery prophet is about to point towards none other than the ‘Lamb of God’: Jesus the gentle saviour who has come to lay down his life for the flock.

As in Isaiah 40 – both acknowledgement of past sins and God’s forgiving mercy are part of the picture. Ignore the demand to confess your sin and you are left with cheap grace that has been robbed of its essential power. Mercy and judgement must go hand in hand. What is grace supposed to be for if not forgiving sins and putting people back on track?

iii

All of us will know times when we are wandering aimlessly in the desert. It happens to us in our professional lives when we struggle at work and wonder whether we are doing the right thing anymore; it happens to us in our relationships when we allow things to go a bit stale; it happens with our prayer life when talking to God seems impossible and unrewarding because we have allowed our faith to wither like an unused muscle, or the all-too-human church has popped our balloon of faith.

Many of us have served a lifetime in declining churches in the West. It is as if we are in exile; as if God has turned away from us forever, or as if God has finally met his match at the hands of western secular materialism.

Today’s readings should give us hope that one day we will hear again the proclamation of Good News. Today’s readings remind us that with God, hope is never dead. The waiting for God’s chosen time may be long and difficult; we may be tempted to throw in the towel, but when God speaks, the whole world is changed. The defeated slaves become the light of the world. The once victorious gods of the earth become no more than lifeless idols.

When we strain to hear the comforting word of God, new life can be breathed into our homes, our hopes and our dreams. God will come to us in our wilderness, but he comes as a gentle saviour who carries the weakest and gently shepherds all his children. God will not trample on someone else just to come to us, but will seek the best for them as well as for us.

The glory of God is to be revealed not just to you, or just to me, but to the whole world. As we journey through advent we must try to make the whole world wake up and hear the Good News – ‘Here is your God’.

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