

St Andrew's Sermon, Advent 2 (The Prophets), 6th December 2020 (Readings: Isaiah 40.1-11 and Mark 1.1-8)

May we all take comfort from God's great and gracious Word, in His sweet and saving Name, one Lord, Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Amen.

This, I confess, is my favourite passage in Isaiah, and all the Old Testament. On my birthday (in far-distant June!) I allow myself to choose daily readings - and this is one. Isaiah has been called "the 5th Gospel", and this wonderful chapter alone supplies most text for Part 1 of Handel's *Messiah* so, for many of us, most verses ring with music and are rich in memory.

In Advent we are called to threefold preparation - for remembering Christ's birth; seeking His coming in each heart now by faith; and looking to His searching judgement and future coming in glory.

And what does God say to each of us first this morning? *Comfort*. Comfort is so much needed by so many just now; as we read this, scattered to our own homes, and many of us grapple with ongoing challenges, in a year which follows no clear trajectory, no simple path to victory, except the long slog of careful perseverance - perhaps the strangest, possibly even the hardest, year here since 1940? Many may have different views, I'm sure! *Comfort*.

I have mentioned threefold preparation - but this rich, complex Isaiah text (dare I mention Christmas pudding?) is also a threefold vision: of God; of God's world; and of our call to respond.

So, then, first, how is Almighty God revealed here?

Let's first rejoice in the sheer *scale*, the breadth of this vision, across the world and through eternity: amid grass that withers and flowers that fade, the written and living Word of God stand for ever;

and, before this glory, Covid and all its works become a very little thing (verse 15). This vast text enlarges our perspective in space and time, giving us spiritual breathing space and a moment to think. God is revealed as one infinite and eternal; who rules, who comes; who gathers, carries, leads; rewards, works; stands; reveals, speaks; comforts, pardons; a God who is unchanging, forgiving, compassionate, strong, gentle.

These words are no press conference reacting to latest events; but are rooted and grounded in the unchanging *character* of Almighty God: identity, words and actions all agree. A tremendously attractive vision of God, a most powerful vision; a vision of a God who *is* love, is compassionate, who comforts, cares; and a vision of a God who is active, at work; whose Word, Isaiah writes elsewhere, *will* accomplish God's good purposes, cannot fail to do so: and of course the Word is made flesh, in Christ, for those good purposes. A vision of an eternal God in Majesty: but also one who is *changing* things; moving the world on; tearing down and building up, making anew; and of a free Spirit, blowing through human life.

This vision - of a God above all; of an eternal Word who is our loving shepherd (perhaps the loveliest of all images of our beloved Christ); and of the Spirit, the wind, the breath (the breathy word *ruach* in Hebrew), the Comforter - is in fact a threefold vision of God - a vision of the Holy Trinity. One reason, at root, that this passage is not only so beautiful (shining so bright even amid the brilliance of the book of Isaiah) but also so powerful, is because of the fullness of its vision of God. As St Paul said of Christ, in this passage "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell": it's all here. Here we have a vision of the Holy and undivided Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost seen in Almighty, unchanging power; in revelation and action,

saving compassion; and the blowing wind, *ruach* in Hebrew, breath, Spirit: of change, consolation and comfort:

a God unchanging; but who also reveals, pours forth, acts, is at work;

a God compassionate, who comforts, cares; who sees our world this year and has pity, mercy on us all; a God who is, in fact, love; a God whose Spirit is blowing on the world even in destruction, desolation and change, and cries out comfort and consolation.

The glory of God is revealed in this passage because what is revealed is the fullness of God: in eternity, in might, and in love.

This passage sets out the heart of our faith in God, our hope in God, and the love that *is* God.

Secondly, what is the loving Lord's vision of the world, this year? Of a world weary; a world in need of forgiveness, compassion, consolation - hope; a world struggling to make sense of suffering, and to look forward; a world crying out for justice, for mercy, for healing and for peace; but also a future vision of the world as a shared, fair place, equable and equal under God, a just world at peace: but which requires radical change in order to become that. The route forward towards that hope involves human hearts and lives being rather a building site for a while! Does anyone remember the Western Bypass being built? The Central Motorway? The Metro? *That* sort of mess, to build a better world... Good news of consolation; but "the times they are a'changin'!": comfort, call and challenge.

Thirdly, how are we called to respond, this Advent?

We are asked to console, to comfort others; to be willing to change; to prepare, to make way for the Kings of Kings in human hearts, beginning with our own, towards His Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace; we are to proclaim love from the rooftops, with courage and with joy. (As St Francis said: “preach the Gospel by every means - use words if you have to”.) We are to be renewed in strength, warmed and cheered in heart by the radiance of a God coming down to earth with great busyness, with much to say and do, to show and live, much to encourage and heal; so many in need of such faith, such hope and such love.

So I say to us all, now and ever - comfort; be comforted: not by me (heaven forbid!); but by the love of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, poured out for and through each of us, whether isolated, demoralised, exhausted, bewildered: comfort ye, and speak ye comfortably: get thee up to Denton Hill Head (highest point in Newcastle, 434') or Currock Hill at the back of Gateshead (850') and say unto the cities - behold your God!

May the love which is the Light of the World shine in your heart and so in your life, whatever your circumstances just now: may your heart be strangely warmed, refreshed in the multitude of peace; and may Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you, and scatter all darkness from before your path

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

AMEN.

*O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favourably, we pray, on Thy whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of Thy providence, carry out in tranquillity Thy plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by Him through whom all things were made, Thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. **Amen.***