

**Second Sunday of Advent 10 December 2017**  
**Sermon by The Rev'd Colin James at All Saints Church Wokingham**  
The readings were Isaiah 40.1-11 and Mk 1.1-8

This afternoon the words will ring out here again, as they have done countless thousands of times in cathedrals, churches, chapels, concert halls, school halls, village halls and even in the open air, for more than 275 years! They're the first words we'll hear as Handel's Messiah invites us once more on a journey. It's the most important journey of our lives. And not only for us, but for the whole human race.

Journeys can be exciting, opening up for us new and wonderful vistas. But they can also be frightening and dangerous. How we feel about them, and indeed cope with them, often depends on whom we are travelling with. Or, since of course we're talking here of the journey of life itself, who is travelling with us. It's good to travel with friends, for company and support. But it's even better to travel with someone who knows the way, because they've been there before us.

Here's a journey we're invited to join by God himself. And the invitation could hardly be more reassuring. "Comfort", not once but twice, "comfort". But we mustn't think that this word comfort suggests something warm and cuddly. This is no invitation to curl up under our duvet and shut out a cold and nasty world. In the Bible "comfort" speaks to us of strength, strength to face everything that lies ahead, what threatens us as much as what consoles us. If we're to trust in the word comfort, we need first to know that the one who offers it does so in the full knowledge of how we've come to be where we are now.

None of us starts out on this journey undamaged by past hurts, those done to us. And equally importantly those we've done to others. So, in order that the promise of comfort may prove effective for us, we need to hear that the "penalty is paid" and that our sins are known and have been dealt with. Standing, as we do in the light of Christ, we know that he has said in effect, "Here, let me have the bill, you can put it on my account." And, believe me, this is not the moment for us to reply, "No. I really couldn't let you do that."

If we're to be up to the journey, we need to listen to our guide and trust him. So if he says that we must let him take the burden off our shoulders, we mustn't resist. Because we should be in no doubt, our way will take us through the wilderness. It's no place to venture alone. Nor to carry with us the weight of all our past folly and mistakes.

A voice intervenes to prompt the prophet. What's needed now is a highway along which God himself will travel, and on which he calls us to join him. This prophet, and those who'll follow after him, are entrusted with the task of making the way passable. Where it's uneven and will cause us to stumble, it's to be levelled out. And where it's rough it needs smoothing out.

Our present author, whom we know as Second Isaiah, has made a wonderful start on clearing the way. His successors will carry on what he's begun. But none more so than John the Baptist. For to him falls the duty of pointing us to the Lord himself. The Lord who will guide

us throughout our journey and will never leave us, but promises to be with us to the very end. Even through the curtain of death, and beyond.

The scene is now set for the glory (that is the presence) of God to be revealed. The revelation is not just for the Jews, nor for that matter for Christians. The mouth of the Lord has spoken, and it's God's will that "all people shall see it together." After offering so much reassurance our reading suddenly takes a different turn. Again a voice prompts the prophet to cry out. So now he reminds us of our frailty and mortality, our impermanence. But of course this is not to be the last word. That belongs to God.

Left to ourselves our constancy will fade and wither, no better than grass. But the good news is that we're not left to ourselves. God is there for us, and "the word of our God will stand for ever". So the prophet must take heart and never stop lifting up his voice to share the good tidings of God's faithfulness, love and care.

The message he is to keep on proclaiming is the very message we recall each year at Advent. "Here is your God! See, the Lord comes with might." But of course that's not the whole story. We and all the generations before us can't escape the fact that in the world we inhabit the might of God is far from obvious. If indeed "his arm rules for him", why is there still so much suffering and evil all around us?

Yet here again the prophecy can help us. Talk of might and the rule of God's arm are not the whole picture. Our reading ends on a distinctly different note. It's not one of crushing military triumph. It's one of gentle care for the weak. The sheep are fed, the new born lambs are carried protectively in a loving embrace. The coming of God among us doesn't take the form people either expected or longed for.

Last week we were reminded of Jesus coming to Jerusalem and its Temple and the prediction of the prophet Zechariah, "Tell the daughter of Sion. Look! Your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey." (Mt 21.5) Faced with all the ills which afflict our world, we could perhaps be forgiven for hoping for a much more robust response from God. But he seems to say to us, "That's what you're getting. Learn to live with it!"

And we've been trying, and all too often failing, to live with it for two thousand years. At least since Christianity became the preferred religion of the Roman Empire (if not before) we, the followers of Jesus, have repeatedly lost sight of our humble King riding on a donkey. And not just humble, but humiliated and given a criminal's death on a cross. If that's the way God intervenes on our behalf, we have to learn to discover how his way can transform the world. God shows us that his way is to care for his sheep. So it's got to be our way too. That's why Jesus had to tell the impetuous Peter to tend his sheep and to feed his lambs.

We know that God portrayed in the Hebrew scriptures all too often appears as a god of battlefield victories. But the Jewish understanding of God was constantly developing and being corrected. His human agents in this process were the prophets. We think of them on this second Sunday of Advent. And we give thanks for the vital part they played in preparing us to welcome the God who visits us in the life of Jesus.

In Advent we recall Jesus coming as a vulnerable baby, and we look forward to his coming again. But in this we're at risk of not hearing the message of the gospel we heard two weeks ago. There Jesus surprised his hearers by saying he'd been present among them in the least of his brothers and sisters whom they'd either cared for or neglected. In this season we're called to wake out of sleep. We must be awake to see Jesus in our neighbours and to recognise God's work in the world. This is in Mark's words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Let us make it good news for us and all people.