

Homily: Sunday 6th December. 2nd of Advent 2020
Readings for Year B. 1st: Isaiah 40:1-5. 9-11; Ps 84; 2nd: 2 Peter
3:8-14; Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

Whenever I hear that 1st reading from Isaiah, I'm transported to the opening Tenor solo of Handel's Messiah: 'Comfort ye my people, says your God.' I do prefer the translation 'comfort' rather than consolation, suggesting a warmer closer friendlier feeling.

Isaiah is a very long prophecy, 66 chapters, and it divides into three sections: We have many Sunday and weekday readings from Isaiah in Advent, and very appropriate always, but maybe more than ever this year.

The 1st 39 chapters are to do with the deportation and exile of the people of Israel to Babylon, modern day Iraq. In Isaiah's the whole of the Middle East is in turmoil and small nations, like Israel are afraid of powerful neighbours.

The 2nd sections chapters 40-55 are called the book of Consolation, hence the translation of our opening. It was written at a time when the power of Babylonia was declining and Cyrus, King of Persia, today Iran, was gaining ascendancy. This is the Cyrus, whom this 2nd second section of Isaiah calls Messiah, the Lord's anointed one, because through him Israel is to gain restoration. The whole book of Consolation addresses the Israelites in exile with a message of joyful hope. Console, comfort, speak to the heart of Jerusalem.

Obviously Jerusalem, Israel, Iraq, Iran, all relevant to the world and its peace today. Equally, this year of lockdown and the tier system, can relate to an exile; the upheaval of so much of life as we know it. Many people acknowledging that things as they were must change. All this is picked up in our Advent season.

A new Exodus, a favourite theme of this book of Consolation, and the journey in the wilderness, where we have been, and still are,

preparing a way for the Lord. Do we not all need some comfort, some consolation: indeed we do, and this season gives it to us.

The prophet is sent by God to announce to a broken people that their long night of exile is coming to an end, and the long journey home, and the hard work of rebuilding their nation, and also restoring their covenant with God. The prophet assures them, God will be with them as their healer, protector and ‘shepherd’ guarding and gathering them in his arms, and giving rest.

All picked up in the Psalm, again words of comfort, consolation, peace, help, mercy, justice, faithfulness, prosperity. The singer imagines a new and thriving Israel, the kingdom of God, built on justice, kindness, truth and mercy.

God promises peace: not just an absence of conflict but a wholeness in relationships between God and his people, among neighbours and with the land itself.

Is that not what everywhere longs for after this exile of 2020? In the 2nd reading St Peter confronts the notion that somehow Christ’s return has been delayed with the Lord being slow to carry out his promises.

Always remember that the first generation of Christians expected that Christ’s return was imminent. This ‘delay’ is a gift of time for repentance and reconciliation with God and one another. Treating time as a gift from God and our lives as experiences of grace marks our identity as an Advent people.

The Gospel writers all invoke Isaiah’s image in their account of John the Baptist. John is a waiting figure, God’s watchman, but his waiting is anything but passive. He does not go out into the wilderness to sit in solitude and wait for the one who is to come. No, the word of God invades his whole being calling the whole people to a change of heart in readiness for the approach of the Lord.

These days of Advent are a microcosm of our lives: we work to become; we struggle to change; we adjust to the new.

The completion of a 'straightened path leads to new directions to travel: the discovery of God reveals new possibilities for our lives.

Things will be different. Make a straight highway for our God across the desert is as ever the Advent call for 2020.