

Advent 2 Year B 2017

Where righteousness is at home

Where do we start today when we have three powerful texts: from the extraordinary words of comfort for broken humanity from Isaiah, the literally earth-shattering (or dissolving) words from Peter's letter, to the familiarity of Mark's Good news – the very opening of the Gospel? All three would provide us with enough material for a series of sermons.

One of the other things to contend with is the fact that the passage from Isaiah sets my mind running off with the melodies of George Frederick Handel, because this one passage provides a backbone in many ways to his greatest work. 'Messiah.' Without looking at the score I think there at least five choruses or solos derived from this one text, including those opening words – words which have much power now as they did when heard by the Children of Israel- *'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.'* Extraordinarily, Charles Jennens, a land-owner and friend of Handel who compiled the texts for Messiah did not particularly care for the work Handel produced, thinking that some of it wasn't worthy of the story of Humanity's Redemption through Jesus Christ – although we know that history has judged the work rather differently!

As I said last week, Advent for me is a season of Longing – and not just for Christmas Day, although it is a yearly opportunity to focus on the birth of Jesus – born just like you and me – the ultimate identification of God with humanity. It is a season when we are (hopefully) reminded that we are the agents through which God desires humanity to be drawn into the mystery of his love; a longing to transform the world into one manifestly shot through with the Love and Glory of God. This might seemingly be an impossible task, yet each deed or action, each prayer, each act of love, helps to bring this about.

Peter gives us an extraordinary picture of this transformation in the passage we heard from him today. What vividness we hear from him! He balances the timeless nature of God with the divine desire of all to be drawn to him – *'The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.'* The promise is that of a new heaven and a new earth – again, as much in the here-and-now as the ultimate promise of being drawn into the Love which marks the heart of the Holy Trinity – the mystery of God. Peter's words illustrate an extraordinary teaching for us on the breadth of God's love, who desires **all** to come to him – to turn God-ward. The word repentance might seem unfashionable to modern ears – it smacks too much for some of actually admitting that there will always be things within our lives which need repair or casting away, but actually repentance means to turn towards God. Peter calls for us to be people *where righteousness is at home* – what great imagery!

So how can this be brought about?

We turn to the Gospel. It's hard to grasp how powerful these opening words of Mark are. Not for Mark the telling of a biography where we only find out who Jesus is at the end of the work! It is not, as I often tell families at baptism where I often use this reading, like a P D James or Agatha Christie murder mystery! No! We are drawn into the knowledge of who Jesus is in the first sentence. Imagine the power of this statement: ***The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*** No ifs, no buts – Mark is not out to convince the reader – Jesus **is** the Messiah, the promised one, the anointed one - God's Son. But there is even more to be gained from this one statement. This is good news. Mark subverts the Roman world in which he lived, because the Greek word for good news which he uses was one used in pronouncements and inscriptions about the God/Emperors including Caesar Augustus. Yet Mark uses this same word for an itinerant carpenter who those in authority regarded as keeping company with some very dubious friends. Mark turns the idea of power on its head. He turns good news on its head. No wonder that the power of this opening phrase so impressed the people of our own land that they adopted the English words for *good news* - *god spel* (and thus Gospel) as the word for the message of Jesus.

Mark, writing a war-time Gospel, as the Romans brought about the destruction of Jerusalem following armed insurrection, next uses words from not just Isaiah, but Exodus and Malachi to lead us to the figure of John the Baptist – the great forerunner, and, for Christians, the greatest and last of the prophets. John spends his whole mission in pointing towards Jesus.

From this opening and grounding in Scripture Mark leads us on a profound journey. The power and majesty of the divine on earth is not found in an Emperor, but in that carpenter, whose moment of glory is found when he is raised on the cross, when he gives himself for the whole of humanity. Indeed, in the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus there is an identification and journeying with each one of us on our earthly journey. It is a call to be drawn into the power of love beyond compare - a desire to allow the Holy Spirit to work through us. This is why, at every Eucharist the president says or sings, 'Lift up your hearts', and the people of God respond, 'We lift them to the Lord.'

Our Faith, a radiant gift of God to the world calls us to celebrate this gift with our hearts high with Hope, longing and fervent expectation. Our task is one in which we are called to be the messengers of the coming of the Kingdom. In season and out of season, we are called to proclaim Good News, even in the face of sorrow or profound loss, indifference or hatred. In doing so, we ourselves become signs of that righteousness which desires a home in all human hearts.

Collect

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power and come among us,
and with great might succour us;
that whereas, through our sins and wickedness
we are grievously hindered
in running the race that is set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy
may speedily help and deliver us;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honour and glory, now and for ever.

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

6 A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'

10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

2 Peter 3: 8-15a

8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Mark 1: 1-8

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight",

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'