

2nd Sunday of advent Sunday 06 December 2020

We missed the end of the church year, culminating in the festival of Christ the King, during the second lockdown in November. So today we find ourselves on the 2nd Sunday in advent (having missed the first one in lockdown) and at the start of a new church year. We have a new cycle of readings through the coming year coming mostly from the gospel of Mark.

Collect

Almighty God,
Purify our hearts and minds, that when your Son Jesus Christ comes again as judge and saviour
We may be ready to receive him who is our Lord and our God
Amen

Readings

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
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.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
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.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

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.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.
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!'

See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
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: 8-15

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. 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. 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.

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, 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? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him

Mark 1: 1-8

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

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ’,

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

Reflection (as preached at St Mary’s, Radnage on 6th December 2020)

- As we will hear when we light the 2nd of our two advent candles this weekend, we are thinking about the prophets who foretold Christ’s coming
- In our readings we have both Isaiah the prophet and John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness, for people to get ready because something great is coming
- We have of course, also had quite a few prophets of our own in recent times telling us what we must do, how we must live, and what is around the corner that everyone should be getting ready for
- These days we see our prophets on television or social media, and in these places, those we might label prophets have been looking ahead to a successful vaccine for COVID, or to a reduction in the R rate so that we can relax and live a little more normally.

- Some of course have been prophets of doom, telling us of very serious consequences unless we follow the rules better, isolate more, try harder, warning us against too much socializing, hugging and so on
- Still others have prophesied that by following the rules, isolating ourselves and our businesses we are actually doing more harm in the long run
- It is extremely difficult to know what to believe for the best despite all these prophecies!
- I wonder if this helps us to imagine the way the messages of Isaiah, and of John, might have appeared to the people hearing them at the time
- The people Isaiah and John spoke to were people living without a health service, with disease and death commonplace
- They lived in fear of persecution, they were subject to violence, they felt that their God had forsaken them,
- They were a people who did not know what action to take to make things right, people who needed comfort and peace
- Sounds very familiar doesn't it!
- So what then was the message these people got from God's prophets.....
- We read those heartfelt words from the beginning of our reading from Isaiah are being answered: Comfort O comfort my people
- God rescued the people of Israel in the wilderness and promises again, tenderly and compassionately, to rescue us from whatever wilderness in which we find ourselves
- Christmas is traditionally a time of the year when many yearn and pray, more than usual, for peace and an end to people's troubles
- And this past year, more than many in recent memory, there is a need for rescue, for an end to current hardship, for the peace of mind that hope for the future and comfort for the present can provide
- Let's try and hang on to the hope that these words of comfort for a better future can bring us
- But let's not just think of our own peace of mind – of finding comfort in the coming of Christ at this time of year only for ourselves.
- Comfort O comfort my people...speak tenderly to them says the Lord
- There are people who need comfort more at this time of year than any other
 - Families facing their first Christmas without a loved one, or with a family member they are unable to see for whatever reason
 - people newly jobless, or with pressure on finances,
 - those who are sick or with family or relationship difficulties
- Our God challenges us to notice those who need comforting. In the coming of Christ, God dwells with those who suffer, those in pain, those who are unloved.
- God speaks to all of us when he says comfort O comfort my people, make a path in the wilderness because I am coming and bringing peace, perfect peace with me!