

*A Highway in the Desert!*

‘Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: the time is coming, says the Lord, when everything in your palace, and all that your forefathers have amassed until the present day, will be carried away to Babylon. Not a thing will be left.’

With these words Isaiah chapter 39 draws to a sombre, threatening conclusion, and with it the first section of the book of the prophet Isaiah. Jerusalem’s fate is sealed. Generations of disobedience and unfaithfulness are going to be punished in one of the most traumatic episodes in the life of the Jewish people: the fall of Jerusalem at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. This once great city with its palace and its temple is to be crushed, its leading citizens taken off into captivity and exile, and it will be left in ruins. And that is the prelude, the background to the passage we read from Isaiah 40 this morning. For about 140 years have passed since those terrible events – and things are about to change. Inevitably, like all empires, Babylon has fallen and now a new power struts upon the landscape of history, and the good news is that the exiled Jews are to be allowed to come home: home to Jerusalem, home to their roots, home to where they belong. A new exodus is taking place: the first exodus had been out of captivity in Egypt, and now there is to be an exodus from Babylon. And this exodus is authorised from heaven’s very heights, and the scene in Isaiah 40 is dramatic indeed.

The heavenly court is assembled and God sits surrounded by the divine council – a rather grander version of our Consistory - and the minutes of the meeting, faithfully inscribed by the angelic scribe, record the decree that goes out. God says to the divine Consistory, take this message of comfort to the exiles: ‘comfort, O comfort my people; speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty paid...’ God is ready to give the exiles in Babylon a new start, a new chapter in their story. And so there will take place this parade, this exodus out of Babylon. And suddenly there is a highway in the desert, and one thing we know is that the Babylonians were really into highways. They built them in a big way for their gods and their religious processions. But this highway here is for a different God. This one is for the God of Israel who is making a come-back – a come-back to power and a come-back to Jerusalem after apparently being humbled by the gods of

Babylon. And in this vision you are called out onto that highway. In this vision you are invited to step out, out of exile and captivity because you believe that ultimately Babylon is not your home. It's not your true destination, the place where you are truly yourself. In your heart you carry a dream of Jerusalem, that place that your great grandparents came from all those years ago. Throughout your childhood you heard stories about Jerusalem and you passed those onto your children and each year you would toast Jerusalem and long for that day when you would return and come home. Now, at last, this vision calls you and the dominant note of this passage is comfort. 140 years previously God had spoken to Jerusalem in anger and judgement. 140 years previously God has spoken of violence and destruction that was to fall upon the nation. But now, listen: 'Comfort, O comfort my people', says your God, 'speak tenderly...' Don't shout, don't threaten, for the strident voice of judgement has been stilled and God is now speaking tender words of comfort. And there follow these stark images of wilderness, of twisted paths and threatening mountains and valleys of despair and the exiles know all about wilderness. And there follow sombre images of death, of flowers fading and grass withering and the exiles know all about mortality. But now, look! The paths are being straightened and the mountains are being levelled and the valleys raised and the breath of God's judgement is being replaced by the Word of life that will stand forever. And just look who is at the head of the procession through the wilderness! It's a shepherd, feeding his flock and gathering the lambs in his arms and gently leading the mother sheep. Here is comfort! Here is peace and rest for the weary and the exiled.

Indeed here in this passage we find expressed most sublimely the comforts of faith. Here is the God who speaks tender words to souls that are bruised and battered. Here is assurance that beyond captivity and exile there is homecoming. Here is the promise that beyond death lies life and new beginnings. Here is God the good shepherd who carries his sheep in his arms. Isn't this the heart of the Gospel?

Our readings this morning, however, do not leave us there. What they do is to span another gap, not this time of 140 years but one of over 400 years, a gap that takes us to the beginning of Mark's gospel. And this time we find ourselves spectators once again of an exodus. Once again a kind of procession is making its way through the wilderness – only, wait a minute! This time it's an exodus not *to* Jerusalem but *from* Jerusalem and its surrounding regions. We

see people flocking into the wilderness and where are they going? Well, again, it's rather different from the Isaiah passage. The people leaving Jerusalem have a rendezvous, only this time not with a gentle shepherd cradling his lambs in his arms. Far from it. Instead we are confronted with the strange figure of John the Baptist, an austere and frightening figure with his camel hair coat and his belt and his crude diet. And he is not speaking tenderly to anyone. His is a fierce message of repentance, of change. And no wonder his pulpit is far from Jerusalem, out in the wilderness. John's clothes and his diet are those of a desert dweller and he would be completely out of place in Jerusalem, the capital city. For John Jerusalem has become a kind of Babylon, an oppressive place, a place to leave, a place to depart from. Jerusalem knows how to deal with prophets like John – it kills them, so he has no place there. And he summons others to leave, to make that exodus into the desert. And you get a tremendous sense here that something new is taking place. Mark begins this first chapter of his gospel with the words, 'the beginning of the Gospel' and where does that phrase take our thoughts? Why, 'in the beginning' of course, right back in Genesis chapter 1. It's as if creation itself is being re-booted, re-started. And if people want to be part of this new thing that God is doing then they need to come out from Jerusalem-Babylon and its surrounding areas and into the desert and there be baptized: this symbol of repentance, of forgiveness and of a fresh beginning. And if Isaiah offered comfort then John offers something quite different. He offers challenge, the challenge of change.

So it is that our readings today give us these two processions: what we might call the procession of comfort and the procession of challenge. And let's just imagine that we could erase the 400 years between them and that they could meet in the desert, one coming from Babylon and one coming from Jerusalem. And I wonder, who would you find on each – and, perhaps more importantly, where would you be found? We've already touched on Isaiah's procession. There you find those in needs of comfort – the weary and the sick and the fearful. There you find the exiled, those who feel forcibly displaced and far from home. There you find those who have been held captive by powers too great for them to overcome. There you find those who need to discover tenderness, who need to be embraced and carried in the arms of the good and gentle shepherd. In other words here you find those for whom religion has traditionally seen as solace, as reassurance. It was Karl Marx who famously described religion as 'the opiate of the people', a kind of a comfort blanket, but

he didn't stop there. He also went on to describe religion as 'the heart of a heartless world' and that is one Marxist tenet that I as a Christian am proud to endorse. In all the stresses and the strains, and the heartache and the pains of living, thank God for this image of the Shepherd as the heart of a heartless world, a Shepherd speaking words of inexpressible tenderness to the traumatised and the defeated. And I'm sure that some of us here today would be down to that procession, for we bear our wounds and we need him to take us up and to carry us in his arms and to give us comfort to get us through the night.

But then there's John's procession, and who might be in that one? I suspect that we would not find people looking for comfort. If they're looking for comfort they won't find much for there's nothing very comforting about John. No, here are people who are restless with things as they are and who want not comfort but change. These are people who have been fed on the diet of Jerusalem-Babylon and who are hungry for something different. Maybe they are tired of religion, religion which so easily becomes oppressive and that creates insiders and outsiders and that excludes those most in need. And Jerusalem is the power-base of religion and so they come out from Jerusalem and Judea to repent and be baptized. And maybe those people are tired of an economic system that makes the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and where too often the cost of wealth creation is the impoverishing of others. And Jerusalem is the economic power-base, and so they came out of Jerusalem and Judea to repent and be baptized. But they also know that there are things in their lives that need to change, that have no place and for which they need forgiveness. And so they came out from Jerusalem and Judea to repent and be baptized. In other words these people know that they are part of a social and political system that is infected with sin and which infects them – but they also know that they are sinners in need of personal repentance and change.

We need both these processions. Faith means comfort from a tender, loving God and heaven knows we need that as we face the harsh realities of life and maybe that's what you need this morning, in which case join Isaiah. But a religion that only offers comfort falls prey to the criticism of the Marxists, that it's just an opiate, just a drug, just something to ease the pain but that leaves the world and ourselves unchanged. And perhaps it's the restlessness, the discomfort of the other procession that you're feeling – or need to feel – in which case join John.

From these readings, Advent is a season of comfort and of change. I wonder which procession you are drawn to. The good news is that you will meet God in both. Amen.

O loving God who we meet in the wilderness,  
we pray for those today who find themselves  
in desert places...  
we pray for the homeless, for those for whom the street  
is the only place to lay their head;  
we pray for refugees and asylum seekers who are exiled  
from home and who must seek refuge in camps or countries  
not their own...  
we pray for peace in the great conflicts that convulse our world, and we  
pray especially today for Israel – Palestine,  
that peace and justice may come and an end to illegal  
settlements and suicide bombers and constant threat of destruction.

And we pray for the peace of that whole region of the middle East...

And we pray for those in special need of comfort today,  
for those in hospital and we think especially of Lottie,  
one of our members...

for those who feel hurt or betrayed in a relationship...

for those who have lost loved ones and face the pain of  
bereavement...

for those who are anxious and troubled or afraid...

And God show us, we pray, the things that need to change  
in our lives and in our world;

make us restless and impatient with wrong wherever we  
meet it, and give us the grace to bring repentance and change.

We pray all these thing sin the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord.  
Amen.