

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

10.12.17 (2nd Sunday in Advent)

Three Journeys

This morning, as we consider our readings and in what follows, we find ourselves embarking on three journeys, or at least joining with others who are setting out on three journeys.

The first actually begin with a glimpse of a scene in heaven where God presides. And God is issuing an important declaration that his heavenly messengers in the heavenly court are called to proclaim. It's a message for God's ancient people Israel who 50 years or so previously had been catastrophically defeated by the dominant empire of their day, Babylon. Their capital city of Jerusalem had been ransacked, leading citizens taken away into exile and this had been a deeply traumatic episode in Israel's history. In God's eyes it was judgement upon Israel, the consequences of wrong and foolish decisions of which they had been warned. Now, however, something new is stirring. Babylon's day has passed. A new empire has arisen and now it is time for God's people to journey back home to Jerusalem. So God's messengers are sent out with a message of restoration and of comfort: '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...' And the vision is of weary exiles journeying home along a highway that runs through the desert. We know that the Babylonians were good at building highways. Highways were constructed as part of their vast temple complexes, and their gods were paraded along them. But this highway is different. It leads back to Jerusalem, back to home. And as they go their God accompanies them, a shepherd leading his sheep back to safety and security, cradling the lambs in his arms. Here is tenderness and protection.

What a beautiful image of salvation that is: salvation as homecoming. Last week we thought of salvation as restoration and this week it is restoration to home, to that place of rest and belonging. In one story about Israel's time in exile in Babylon we read of a man called Daniel who each day used to go to his room and open the windows in the direction of Jerusalem and to get down on his knees in prayer, bowing towards the holy city. And I love that image, of the exile aligning himself with us true home, reorienting himself to his true centre, to where his heart lies. That what salvation is about and that image of home is

one that we find in stories Jesus told, like the young man who left home and squandered all his wealth until at last, destitute and broken, he returned home and to the loving embrace of his father. This is salvation, coming home to where we truly belong, coming home to where we are truly ourselves, and our reading from Isaiah allows us to join those who are making that journey.

Then, however, our second reading takes us to another journey people are making and this is rather different. These people are not journeying to Jerusalem but from it, and out into the wilderness near the River Jordan where a strange figure is preaching a fiery message. He knows that, once again, as with Isaiah, something new is stirring. God is intervening in the world and people must adjust to what is happening. Only this time the message is not one of comfort but of challenge. This is a message to people who must make a break with home, cut their ties with their familiar world. So they must leave Jerusalem and journey out into the wilderness and encounter God there, in the preaching of this one who baptises and tells of another who is coming. This is a different journey from that of Isaiah's exiles – a less comfortable one. You could say that where Isaiah is the great comforter John is the great disrupter; where Isaiah's message welcomes us home John's message prises us out of our comfort zones. Where Isaiah's shepherd is tender John is abrasive. He speaks the language of repentance, and repentance means setting your sails to a different wind, the wind of the Spirit that is now blowing, and with which this coming one will baptise us. John's message of repentance asks us, where do we need to change?

Here we find the tension that is always to be found at the heart of the Gospel. Christ's coming into the world brings with it inexpressible comfort, a deep and lasting peace that the world cannot give. Christ's coming means that God is at work. We are not left on our own. We are in the hands of one who cradles us like new-born lambs and who leads us home. But by itself that message leaves the world as it is and it leaves us as we are. It changes nothing. It's all comfort and no confrontation, all consolation and no change. Homecoming requires a resetting of our bearings, a reorienting of our lives.

Two journeys, then, in our readings: one leading to Jerusalem, to home and to comfort; and one leading out of Jerusalem, to repentance and to change. Both journeys, however, lead to Jesus. He is the one who offers comfort to the afflicted, and rest to the weary and the heavy-laden. But he is also the one who calls us to follow him and by whose Holy Spirit we receive grace to change.

And that brings us, finally, to a third journey - one that combines these other two. It's a journey that we hear about at this time of year and that we will hear now. On this journey we meet tender shepherds; and we meet a sheep who needs to be led home; and we meet strange pilgrims who have left comfort and home travelled a long way. And all the roads in this journey lead to Jesus... so let us hear about it now.

Gracious God,
We hear this morning of a desert,
a dangerous place,
but one with a highway running through it.
And on that highway we see a shepherd,
gathering lambs,
and leading them to home and to safety.

O God, this vision is good news,
for our world this morning is a dangerous place.
We have read of Jerusalem to which exiles return,
and developments in the status of Jerusalem in recent days,
aimed at bringing peace,
run the risk of heightening danger,
and inciting conflict and hatred.
O God, bring peace to Jerusalem, to Israel,
and to Palestine, and to the middle East.
Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

And we have heard this morning of exiles,
of people returning home, rejoicing.

And we pray once more for those displaced by war,
those forced to find refuge far from their homeland.

We pray for the work of the Werldhuis here in Amsterdam,
and the Protestantse diaconie in its ministry
of caring for those in need.

And we pray too for the homeless and the work of the Kloof,
that it may be supported, and the vulnerable cared for.

Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

And we pray for your church.

Baptise us afresh with the Holy Spirit,
renew our life and our witness,
and we pray that in the coming days
the wonder of your coming in Christ
will be proclaimed, and that people
will be drawn into the life of your Kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

And lastly, loving shepherd of the sheep,
hold close those in special need –
the sad, the weary, the anxious.
Lift them out of the valleys of fear
and grant them comfort and peace.

And we pray all these things in the name of our Lord
and Saviour Jesus Christ in whom you have come to us.
Amen.