

6 December 2020, 2nd Sunday of Advent

Christ Church Cathedral

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In the name of the living God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Long ago when first faced with the task of preaching, I remember being told that a good sermon will comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. In fact, this was first said of "good art", or in particular "a good novel", but the challenge to the preacher, indeed to scripture itself, still stands. Perhaps it's particularly true today, when the virus' threat of sudden death for individuals and economic mayhem for nations has all of us grasping for every straw of hope and crumb of comfort.

"Comfort, comfort my people", God commanded Isaiah as he stood in exile with the Jewish people in Babylon. "They have suffered enough. I'm coming to bring them home. Make way for me. Make way for them!" And God presented himself as more than a commander; a gentle shepherd who gathers the lambs in his arms and gently leads the mother sheep; one who tends the vulnerable and guides the confused. God's promise of comfort and deliverance to Isaiah has extended down the centuries to communities in danger and distress, transferred from one situation of anxiety or despair to another, and it was recalled in particular in the call of John the Baptist to the Jewish people oppressed by Rome some 500 years later.

Down the centuries, deliverance and restoration, but also renewed conflict and conquest, repression and then revival, continued - perhaps especially in Israel in the centuries before Jesus' birth and his ministry. After returning from exile in Babylon the Jewish nation came under the rule of first Persia, then Alexander the Great and his successors, and finally the Roman Empire, with only a brief precarious period when they could be said to be in charge of their own affairs. So it's hardly surprising that they came to grasp more and more firmly at the hope of a *final* intervention by God in history as the years went by. A deliverance that would last.

So Isaiah's words of comfort flowered in Daniel's vision of the Son of Man "coming with the clouds of heaven" to be given "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him ... in an everlasting kingdom which would never be destroyed". This was the vision at the root of Jesus' title "The Son of Man" in the Gospels. It was the beginning of what came to be called "apocalyptic" - the promise cherished in Jesus' day that God would break dramatically into history to destroy evil and bring in a new creation - a promise seen as beginning to be fulfilled in Jesus as he announced that the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

But it was to Isaiah's declaration of comfort and coming glory that John the Baptist referred as he called the people out of Jerusalem to repent and be baptised. The need for repentance - this now is the disturbing bit - was always central in Hebrew teaching and culture, because as God's chosen people, only their sinfulness, their turning their back on God, could explain why he failed to protect them against one disaster after another. God was punishing them in the short term, but in time he would forgive them, deliver them from oppression and make them first citizens of his kingdom of justice and peace. Because, after all, they were his

special people, the seed of Abraham, through whom all nations, according to God's promise, were to be blessed.

This is the culture and the expectation into which Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist were born. And John was the first to take the stage, with the intuition that at last God was now about to act decisively. To be ready for the inbreaking of his kingdom, everyone must repent and be cleansed of their sins. Being baptised in the River Jordan, through which God's people had first entered the Promised Land, symbolised their readiness; it also marked Jesus as the one destined to open up God's way - baptising us with the Holy Spirit.

So John announces the coming of Jesus, and Mark then describes how, as he baptised him in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and a voice from heaven declared him "My Son, with whom I am well pleased!" In the short few years that were to follow, as Jesus drew crowds by his healing miracles, his teaching of God's love and his deeds of power, the belief grew that he was the promised Messiah, the anointed king of David's line who would finally put an end to foreign oppression, and especially to the pagan, blasphemous dominion of Rome. It was not a title Jesus encouraged, because of the violent conflict and bloody victory it suggested. He was not that kind of king, he told Pilate, according to John, when his challenge to both religious and political authority landed him in court on trial for his life; his kingdom was not of this world; if he were King of the Jews, his followers would be fighting to protect him; but his kingdom was "not from here". (*John 18.36*)

Yet the title of Messiah, the anointed one, in its Greek translation Christos, has remained firmly his to this day. "Are you the Christ, the son of the blessed?," the high priest asked Jesus, according to Mark; and his reply was, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power and coming with the clouds of heaven." (*Mark 14.vv.61-62*) We are back with Daniel's vision - in the world not so much of history as of apocalyptic. Jesus is both the promised Saviour born in Bethlehem and the one who will come again to finally establish God's kingdom - and in Advent every year we remember that we live between those two times, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and his expected Second Coming, more than two thousand years after his death on the cross and his resurrection. The Coming the Church still awaits.

So let's get back to the comfort - and the challenge it comes with.

First the challenge, to disturb the "comfortable" among you: today's epistle, written around 100 AD, makes it explicit. While the day of the Lord, destroying the earth to make way for God's new creation, has been delayed - (and while indeed we may agree with T S Eliot's line that the world will end not with a bang but a whimper) - nonetheless the end and the judgement WILL come. We may think of it as coming at the end of our lives, or at the end of the world, but either way we must indeed, as this epistle urges, "strive to be found at peace, without spot or blemish", today, tomorrow or whenever. "God is patient and wants all to come to repentance", the writer tells us; but as in the days of John the Baptist, so now, repentance is necessary for new life.

And now for the good news, found in the last words of today's gospel: "He - (that is Jesus) - will baptize you with the Holy Spirit". "The promise is for you and for your children and for those who are far off" as Peter told the first converts at Pentecost, recalling that God has promised to pour out his Spirit on all flesh, all races, all cultures. (*Acts 2.vv. 38-39 and 17*)

Rejoicing in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is not just for the charismatics and the Pentecostalists of the Church. The Spirit is given to us all, sometimes dramatically or at the key occasions of baptism and confirmation, more often quietly, over and over again, as we turn to God in openness, seeking forgiveness, guidance, and the knowledge of his presence and his unconditional love - the comfort God promises his people. Let's just take a moment in silence to do that now . . . open ourselves to the Spirit . . .

Thank you Lord, thank you. Make us channels of your love to one another, and to all whom we meet and for whom we pray. Amen.