

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 6th December 2020
Second Sunday of Advent

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.

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 3:8-15a

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.

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.’

Sermon

Every Tuesday my brother has a day at home with his two year old son, Alex – it's what he likes to refer to as Daddy Daycare. Invariably, part way through the morning, we will receive a series of photographs entitled "spot the Alex". It seems that my nephew enjoys hiding, and my brother certainly enjoys the obscure, so we are invited to find where Alex might be in each photograph. As you can imagine, this involves a great deal of zooming in on various parts of the image to see if I can spot a tell-tale wellington boot or mitten. And what I realise each time I engage with the game is just how much detail we miss when looking at a picture in its entirety. It's just like looking at a canvas at the National Gallery. Standing back, you get a sense of the whole scene, but if you step forward and look carefully, there are countless details that you just don't notice unless you're taking the time to look.

One of the key features of this morning's readings is their sense of perspective. More specifically, their reminder that we need to maintain different perspectives when living out our lives.

The Old Testament reading, which I know we often omit, is a familiar part of the book of the prophet Isaiah. It speaks words of comfort, and we need to hear these in the context of what has come before. The people to whom Isaiah is speaking are in exile. For them, God has seemed very absent indeed, and while we are told that it is their own sin that has led them to this place, their distress is none the less real. And into this distress, the prophet speaks words of comfort, promising that God is indeed present. The God of whom Isaiah speaks is powerful, yet also like a shepherd, nurturing and comforting the flock.

When Bishop Jo was with us, she reminded us that while we may feel that it is harder to be a Christian now than it was when our church building was constructed in 1895, there is no doubt at all that it is no more difficult than it was for the Christians of Ephesus. Likewise, we can probably recognise that our circumstances, while challenging, are no more so than those of the people of Israel following the destruction of Jerusalem. This kind of perspective can help us to draw comfort from the words of those who have maintained faith no matter what their situation. It can also, perhaps, help us to appreciate that while this current season may be one in which churches across much of the Western world are experiencing declining congregations, we need not be down-hearted because people have maintained faith in God through worse.

The words of our second reading, the second letter of Peter, continue to challenge our sense of perspective. Indeed the opening words speak of the eternal perspective with which God sees, set against our own worldly perspective. Where this epistle moves us on from Isaiah is that Peter, like Isaiah, shows us the big picture, yet he follows up by focusing in on the smaller details. He seeks to remind us that, while God may see and understand the world rather differently than we do, that doesn't mean that we have no part to play. On the contrary, he encourages us to lead lives of holiness and godliness as our preparation for the second coming.

One of the challenges we can all face when looking at the big picture is that sense of powerlessness to do anything that can make a difference. Whether we are considering the actions of our own government, the international context, or matters like global poverty, it can feel like anything we do is either insignificant or a drop in the ocean. Yet, just as I can find my nephew in my brother's pictures if I focus on the right part, so each of us does indeed make a difference by living God-centred lives, and acting according to God's call.

Which brings us to the gospel reading, the opening of St. Mark's gospel, which introduces John the Baptist. Because it is really John the Baptist who helps us to understand our own lives better. What we are called to – and what we are not. As with so many figures who appear in the scriptures, we really don't know all that much about John. Luke's gospel tells us a little about his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah. And later in both Matthew and Mark's gospels, we hear the story of his imprisonment and death, at the behest of the daughter of Herodias. I always find it hard to get beyond the rather unattractive image of a man clothed in camel hair with a leather belt around his waist eating locusts and wild honey. Yet, what is never in any doubt, is that John the Baptist knows that he is there to prepare the way for Jesus.

The reason I say that John the Baptist helps us to understand our own lives better is because really his vocation is our vocation. We are here to prepare the way for Jesus. To prepare the way in our own hearts. And to seek to prepare the way in the hearts of others.

It may sound simple, and of course we all know that it isn't. Yet it is important, along with John the Baptist, to recognise the centrality of that vocation.

When we look at that big picture, seeing all of the challenges facing the world and indeed individuals, it can be so easy in our sense of powerlessness to forget the one thing that John the Baptist kept on emphasising. That he – and we – are not the Messiah.

But if that recognition leaves us feeling that there is nothing of value for us to do, we really have got it wrong. Because the task of preparing the way is very important indeed – and it is what each of us is called to do. The reason it isn't easy is because preparing the way will look different for each one of us. Preparing the way in our own hearts involves self-knowledge and spending time in God's presence, seeking God's wisdom and guidance. It involves spending time with others who can also help us to understand our gifts and strengths, and where they can be put to best use in God's service. And then, in our interactions with others, we will be inspiring others to prepare the way to welcome God into their own hearts, living lives dedicated to God.

One of the reasons that I rather like John the Baptist is that he is such an unlikely character. He really is an individual. And that's quite important, because each of us is, too. Your way of preparing the way may not look like John the Baptist – indeed it almost certainly won't. Yet God does call you as you are, with the gifts that you have been given. Each of us will have a different way of preparing for the coming of Christ. And that is surely to be welcomed.

So, in this Advent season, we are called to spend time looking at both the big picture, and focusing in more closely on our own small parts of it. And listening carefully to the ways in which we are being called to prepare ourselves and others to welcome Christ anew.

Amen