

Isaiah 40.1-11

Peter 3.8-15a

Mark 1.1-8

‘Comfort, Comfort my people’.

I have always worked pretty hard, and taken a break when I really needed it. This week I was fortunate enough to have that opportunity to rest. I love Advent and Lent because they take me again to the desert, to the prophets, with their dire predictions, and to God, to rest, to wait, to listen, to learn, and to be found. I took a Mental health day and a bit this week.. to top up.. Thank you God.

‘Comfort, Comfort my people’. (Is. 40:1)

The prophet we call second Isaiah speaks to a people in exile in Babylon 2,500 years ago.¹

‘Comfort, Comfort, my people.’ Handel quotes in his Messiah.

‘Comfort comfort all my people’ robin Mann writes in the hymn we’ll sing at 10 o’clock later.

‘Comfort, Comfort, my people.’ The prophet speaks to those in exile today, refugees, victims of war, those tossed out of families or communities, exiled from society...

Does he speak to you -

to those who are grieving - there has been so many deaths among us this year, to those who are ill and whose loved ones are ill, those in the desert of consumerism and Christmas decorations ...?

‘Comfort, Comfort, my people’ says the prophet.

He says to the leaders:

‘prepare the way, make straight the path through the wilderness’ home to Jerusalem, to God.

The prophet speaks of an awesome powerful God whose breath destroys the people; setting this image alongside an immanent gentle pasturing God, carrying the small ones close and leading the carers.

¹ https://resources.holycovenant.org.au/docs/sermons/2008/Sermon_2008-12-07.pdf

The prophet speaks of the physical – the King’s Highway from Babylon to Jerusalem, the road through the desert, a road for trade in spices and food, a road for armies to conquer; a vital trade route. The Israelites had once travelled home on this road from Egypt in the west, now they are called to return home from the east.

On this road Jesus speaks of dangers – of the good Samaritan. On this road Paul encounters the Christ, on this road Peter meets the Ethiopian eunuch – this physical journey is through the desert. This parallels the spiritual journey...

Our journeys are generally comfortable – in air conditioned cars on safe straight freeways – not toughened bare feet in searing desert heat.

But paradoxically, the journey to Christmas is through the desert for many, especially at the end of a long year in Australia coming up to holiday time. The desert place is where we often meet God.

Brother Roger from Taizé urges us² to ask the help of the Holy Spirit, wait patiently, expectantly, lovingly, longingly.

‘See yourself as the parched ground looking upwards waiting patiently for the rain to fall. You can only wait.’ He says.

The prophet calls us home through this desert, this wilderness – that is the starting point.

The prophet calls us back to the centre, which is God – to the feed trough and the vulnerable child – calls us to the centre; the ground of our being – this God journeys with us in this wilderness, from our comfortable exile.

Where is God? God is here inviting us to more ...

It is no coincidence that on this second Sunday in Advent, this Isaiah reading is paired with Mark Chapter 1, also set in the desert, also in a time of occupation. No mucking around – ‘the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ’, we hear, harkening back to the creation, to Genesis.. something new is happening here.. he announces, and then an Isaiah quote from this chapter:

‘the voice of one crying out in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord make straight his paths ...’ (Mk 1, Is 40)

² Esther De Waal Lost in Wonder, p.22

and everyone from the surrounding regions were coming to him, to John, attracted despite themselves to this wild, unkempt prophet hurling abuse and challenge, offering baptism, cool refreshing water in the desert, a daring new beginning in the desert.

Coming home. 'Comfort comfort my people', a strange comfort here!

It often takes harsh words to shake us out of our comfort zone.

harsh words

a shock

a poor prognosis

Loneliness, mental illness,

redundancy

a time of wilderness

to focus our thinking,

to lead us home, to the centre, to our core values,

back to God –

(or away)

And it takes will power and discipline to head home, to create space for God, to open our arms to receive this babe, especially in the wilderness.

And John says:

'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.'
(Mk 1:8)

'Mark identifies John the Baptist as the link between Israel's past (symbolised by the prophets) and its future (announced as the one who is to come). And the journey from this past into the promised future is imaged as a second exodus journey. John the baptizer appears (we are told) in the wilderness, where the wilderness symbolises 'the time when God was preparing the people for entry into the promised land'.³

³ Sarah Bachelard. http://benedictus.com.au/pdf/Tidings_061214.pdf

This is Chapter 1, verse 8, the very beginning of the gospel we will focus on this year. Then in the very next verse, Jesus is there being baptized himself. Mark's urgency pushes us forward.

No mucking around –
a response is called for ...

What response can it be, this close to Christmas?

Take a deep breath. Take stock.

You can do it.

It is Advent, and the prophet is encouraging 'Comfort, Comfort, my people...' here, in the midst of all this, is your God.

How do you respond? Sarah Bachelard reflects:

'Traditionally on the second Sunday in Advent we light the peace candle. A biblical scholar I knew used to complain that, in English, 'peace' is a flaccid word – a pale notion which points towards an absence, the absence of war or conflict. Whereas, he insisted, the biblical concept of peace – shalom – is a rich and positive notion, with connotations of well-being, abundance, and justice.

Isaiah speaks of the coming of God in these terms:

'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 those that are with young' (Isa. 40.11).

So also the angels who gave glad tidings of Jesus' birth to Luke's shepherds:

'Glory be to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours'.

The good news is news of peace, shalom, God's blessing and healing and abundant life – which we receive insofar as we allow ourselves to be drawn into and participate in the dynamic of God's own, shalom bestowing life.

And this involves, as John the Baptist proclaims, repenting – turning away from what is not God, having our patterns of thought and heart renewed, and letting ourselves be led through the wilderness of our fears and lostness, into new life. And notice what this must involve if it is truly to be 'good news', public, historical, incarnate news.

God's peace is not about our hunkering down into some private state of non-disturbance, but becoming those who live peaceably

and create peace in our world. At Ashleigh House on Thursday, a number of people asked that we pray for peace in our world. And God's presence is not about having a personal, 'spiritual' experience that makes me feel special, but learning to recognise the presence of God in the world and in others, so as to be someone who evokes that healing reality in them and in our common life'.⁴

In our daily Advent reflections we read:

Every church wants to grow. We all want to be able to bring in new people.

But what happens when the most progressive church in town is visited by the most Conservative voice in the community, who gives every indication that this is the family of faith he has been searching for and finally feels he has found?

How does the minister who takes pride in looking after people on the streets – making sure they are fed, and sheltered- respond when two of the street families show up and announce they want to be baptised and join the church?

What does the theological student who all the professors are convinced is destined for one of the well-healed coveted churches, do when she opens the letter from the tiny, struggling, destined-to-close-its-doors congregation telling her that they believe God is calling her to serve with them at the corner of Hopeless and Washed out streets?

Maybe these are the moments, the people, the challenges, we are offered to help us regain our sight and see God's rule, God's shalom as it is truly meant to be.

God of Advent,

Remind us,

that the people you send us to care for
(and care for us)

May not always be the ones we expect.⁵

Among refugees and outcasts
you breathed your first breaths.

⁴ Sarah Bachelard

⁵ *Christmas in the Diner* Thom Shuman, Wild Goose Publications

In the cry of a new born child you proclaimed
Emanuel, God-with-us.
Come, God of the margins,
breathe into us the spirit of longing for your way.
Come this Advent to make us dream of
and work for
a better world of justice and freedom.
Come, Lord, come.
Amen⁶

Prepare the way – that is the call of Advent. Go through your
wilderness – Prepare a path so God may find you and comfort you
as you find and comfort others.⁷

susanna

⁶ page 34 *wild goose big book of liturgies* Iona Community

⁷ Bachelard