**READINGS:**

**ISAIAH 40 1-9**

**MARK 1 1-6**

Let’s face it the commercial run⎯up to Christmas and the holy season of Advent do make uneasy bedfellows.

Already the hurly burly of shopping expeditions and drinks parties are taking their toll on some of us.

Perhaps we may need a spiritual uplift from such distractions.

If so we certainly get it from both the comfort

and the call of today’s first reading

There is a real wake-up call here because the excitement,

the mystery

and the anticipation

of Advent are nowhere better communicated in the Old Testament than in these hauntingly familiar verses from Isaiah Chapter 40.

I call them “hauntingly familiar” verses because millions of people across the world know them, although often without having a clue that they come from the Bible.

That’s because for over 200 years they have been, and will be used this Advent in concert performances of Handel’s Messiah, which took Isaiah 40 as its opening libretto.

Just as a personal aside here, I think one of the most thrilling moments of my childhood occurred when I stood, literally tingling with anticipation, as a 9 year old choirboy in a 300 strong Messiah chorus of East Anglian voices in Norwich Cathedral in 1952.

We were poised waiting for the raised conductor’s baton of Sir Malcolm Sargent to fall and begin the opening tenor recitative

“Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people”. What a wow moment that was!

However, I’m sure I didn’t have any idea what the words meant over 60 years ago and I’ll bet that the people of Jerusalem in 500BC didn’t understand what they meant either when they first heard them as it were *live* from the *lips* of the Prophet Isaiah.

Yet they too would surely have tingled with the anticipation of the moment

With the feeling that something extraordinary was being announced

and with the hope that some momentous changes were about to happen in order to fulfil Isaiah’s dramatic Prophesy in Verse 5.

“And the glory of the Lord will be revealed.”

What did those words signify for the ancient people of Israel and what do they mean for us today?

It’s a mystery. But to solve it I suggest we should explore four themes;

* God’s judgement
* God’s love
* God’s coming
* God’s glory

God’s judgement is not exactly a popular topic for preachers in our contemporary age, which Dietrich Bonhoeffer labelled “the age of cheap grace.”

It is of course quite different from Secular judgement.

That evokes the image of

* Courts
* Judges
* Litigation
* Libel cases
* Prison sentences.

Well let me assure you from the perspective of someone who has been there, done that and got the T-shirts that secular judgement is temporal, transient stuff quite different to the divine judgement of which Isaiah was speaking.

Isaiah’s words are a salutary reminder that one day each and every one of us will have to face God’s judgement

and that it may be a tough judgement.

The people of Jerusalem of this era seem to have committed more than their fair share of sins.

If you read the early chapters of the book of Isaiah you will find that the prophet savagely criticised his people

* For marginalising God
* For mocking God
* For being a people of unclean lips
* For wearing their pride like a necklace

And even for a special sin in Isaiah 5:22 (wait for it):

“For being heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks.”

Christmas party goers and bar tenders be warned!

But the serious point here is that even if cultures change, God’s judgement awaits us all.

Yet in the same verses as the prophet reminds us that the people of Jerusalem had to pay *double* for their sins, God also sends them a beautifully loving message

“Comfort, comfort my people and speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”

This is the voice of the loving, forgiving God of Grace who speaks as he ushers in a new beginning for them and for the world.

Now there is a paradox here. A rather uncomfortable paradox between

the God of judgement and

the God of grace.

But the tension ⎯ surely a loving tension ⎯ between these two concepts of God is not really so difficult to understand.

Many of you have done the Alpha Course. You will remember one part of it focuses on a verse of invitation from Revelation Chapter 3 verse 20, illustrated by the Holman Hunt painting “The Light of the World” which depicts Jesus knocking at a door obstructed by thorns and briars.

The verse goes “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him and he with me.”

But what is left out of this Biblical message of hope and comfort is the previous verse: Revelation 3:19 which is about judgement.

It goes

“Those whom I love I rebuke and chasten. So be earnest and repent! Behold I stand at the door and knock……”

So if you put these two sequential verses together, it becomes clear that God’s *judgement* on our lives is often an essential prelude to God’s *entry* into our lives.

So the message from Isaiah to Revelation via the Gospels is that God’s judgement may be part of the process of being offered God’s second chance.

I came to understand that process myself although rather slowly and painfully when I was sitting in a cell at HMP Belmarsh serving my 18 month sentence for perjury.

Inevitably my prison journey was a rollercoaster ride.

But among the upswings of the rollercoaster were the prison visits from Christian friends, some of them members of the HTB family with whom I had done Alpha

Friends like Nicky Gumbel, Bruce Streather and the former churchwarden of HTB Michael Alison

They were voices of comfort, tenderly suggesting that perhaps with God’s love I might be given a second chance.

Well their message, which seems to have come true in my case was the same loving message in miniature that Isaiah proclaimed, speaking tenderly to the people of Jerusalem.

One slight problem with messages from the Old Testament prophets is that they didn’t always get communicated in language the man in the street could easily understand.

Can’t you imagine 6th Century Jerusalem the local worthies saying to one another as they heard the words of verses 3 and 4

* What’s Old Isaiah going on about now?
* What’s all this about voices crying in the desert?
* Valleys being exalted
* Mountains being made low?
* And rough places being turned into a plain
* “What does all this mean?” they may have said scratching their heads

We in the 21st Century have an advantage over those 6 Century BC local worthies.

We know these verses from Isaiah are a great Messianic prophecy.

We know if we are listening to Handel’s Messiah that the next chorus is “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.”

We know if we look at our first reading from Mark’s Gospel that the voice calling in the desert was the voice of John the Baptist

proclaiming to his generation of the people of Jerusalem in verse 7:

“After me will come one more powerful than I …….I baptise you with water but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit”

That was what Isaiah meant when he prophesised that the glory of the Lord will be revealed. That indeed was what happened in the First Advent – the coming of Christ and the revelation of the glory of God.

And there is an unbroken line of glory here from Isaiah’s prophesy in Chapter 40 to the Gospel on Christmas Day⎯John Chapter 1 the wonderful passage which starts “In the beginning was the word….”

Perhaps we too will tingle with awe and wonder when we hear the final verse of that reading:

“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory.”

So now we know that the glory of the Lord is coming ⎯ what should we be doing to prepare for it?

The early church answered this question by creating the season of Ad Ventus ⎯ Latin for “towards the coming.” And ever since, in this season, good Christian believers have been supposed to

er…………….um………………….what? Precisely what?

Confusingly the meaning of Advent has become rather fuzzy. The trumpet gives an uncertain sound these days:

Is it a season of contemplation, penitence and fasting? As it used to be, and still is in the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Or is it a season of longing and calling as perhaps suggested by the medieval antiphon still sung today “O come O Come Emmanuel”

Or is it a season of celebration, pop up Advent Calendars and jolly Christmas Carols

Or has it become a secular season when we rollover and give in to the temptations of commercialised Christmas, following in the footsteps of those early Jerusalemites who marginalised God and elevated self-indulgence?

On an optimistic note, we probably would not be here filling our church in such large numbers today if we were inclined to make the same old mistakes as Isaiah’s people did.

Instead we are here, listening to God’s word because we are seeking to find out our own individual answers to the transcendent question of Advent.

What does God want us to do, in order to prepare for the coming of his son Jesus Christ?

For inspiration here, let’s turn to one of Tudor England’s greatest spiritual leaders who in sublime language and timeless theology captured the spirit of Advent preparation quite magnificently.

He was Thomas Cranmer King Henry VIII’s Archbishop of Canterbury who in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer wrote what many regard as his greatest ever spiritual composition⎯ the Collect for Advent. This is how it begins.

**Almighty God give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the amour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility…..**

*Now* I know that HTB doesn’t often do BCP, but these words surely transcend all church traditions.

So it is no surprise that this particular Cranmerian Collect has survived so vividly down the centuries. It is still read in many churches every single day of Advent.

It combines the quintessential spirit of the readings we heard today yet it also gives them a contemporary thrust with the powerful use of the word now.

“*Now* in the time of this mortal life.” It is here and now in the present time that we are being urged to cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armour of light. Now!

Sadly works of darkness are always with us. They are to be found in the secret places of some human hearts.

They were a spectacularly sinful feature of Isaiah’s Jerusalem.

And they blacken our troubled world today

in brutalised Syria,

in the beheadings of Isis

and in the vicious efforts of terrorists to drive Christianity out of the Middle East.

Yet even in this darkening environment John the Baptist remains an inspirational figure. His tomb in Damascus is still honoured and prayed over in Advent by the brave survivors of the Christian Community in Syria.

And John the Baptist’s message is as relevant as it was in the first Advent. Look at verse 4 of Mark Chapter 1.

“And so John came…….preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

I sometimes think that the word repentance translates rather inadequately in the English language.

It conjures up images of saying sorry over and over again; standing in the corner, writing out 100 lines, and in the old days wearing sackcloth and ashes.

But if you go to the original language in which the gospels were written, the Greek word for repentance is the much more positive metanoia ⎯

literally a change *meta* of *noia* (mind) most richly translated as a transformation of heart and mind.

Not far removed perhaps from putting on the armour of light.

Now transforming our hearts and minds at one of the most distracting times of the year requires extra discipline.

It’s not easy today to wrestle with the competing pressures of Advent by our own efforts.

To borrow a salutary warning sentence from the Alcoholics Anonymous Course in a different context:

“You may not be able to get to step No 12 by your own will power. You may need the help of a higher power”

Whose power?

Now we are getting to the heart of the great revelation that takes place in Advent.

We mean of course the power of the one whose sandals John the Baptist felt unworthy to untie.

The one who was coming to baptise the world not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

So when we search for ways of preparing for His coming, it is historically as well as spiritually right to pray for our souls to be replenished by the power of the Holy Spirit during Advent.

Because it was during the first Advent, that the Holy Spirit came to fill the hearts of ordinary run of the mill people for the first time in human history.

In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit made occasional appearances but he revealed himself only to a handful of great figures over the centuries such as

Kings like David,

Prophets like Elijah

or lofty personages like Bezalel the builder of the Temple.

But excitingly in the first Advent the Holy Spirit came down to the hill county of Judaea and revealed himself to the humblest of people like:

Elizabeth and Zacharia

the parents of John the Baptist,

to their son John,

to Mary the unmarried girl from Nazareth, destined to be mother of Jesus

And to Simeon the old man in the Temple

All these ordinary people had their lives filled and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And he has, ever since, been filling and changing ordinary lives by his extraordinary presence and power.

So lets now pray for his help this Advent

So let’s learn from the first Advent.

Let us now bow our heads and pray.

Lord help us to prepare for your coming

O Come O Come Emmanuel

Come Holy Spirit

Make the rough places of our characters into a plain

And comfort, comfort us with your grace

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the amour of light.

Now in the time of this mortal life in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility

Now Lord…..Come Lord Come!

May the Glory of the Lord be revealed to us transform us and shine through us

This Advent – now and for evermore. Amen