

Advent 2: 10 December 2017

Promise and Preparation

- Isaiah 40.1-11
- Psalm 85.1-2,8-13
- 2 Peter 8-15a
- Mark 1.1-8

Millennia ago, the prophet Isaiah told of a time when God would come and save his people. A lone voice would be the harbinger of the Lord's coming, crying out;

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Isaiah 40.3*

That coming would bring sweeping change - a shaking and reshaping of the world in which valleys were raised and mountains levelled, the rough made smooth and the rugged a plain to prepare a royal road for the coming Messiah.

Generations later, Mark begins his account of "*the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" (Mark 1:1) by identifying John the Baptist as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy:

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... Mark 1.2-3

It's a dramatic introduction to Jesus' ministry – none of the focus on the birth narrative seen in Luke's Gospel, or the cosmic scene-setting of John ... rather an immediate plunge into the sweep of events in the Holy Land that begins with John the Baptist's proclamation of the coming Messiah.

Contemporary witnesses might have been tempted to wonder whether John's proclamations really fulfilled the prophecy. The world was not visibly shaken: landmarks remained where they were, and the geography of the Holy Land was unaltered.

And yet, the world was shaken. John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus by proclaiming and practising "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" (Mark 1:4) The word translated 'repentance' is the New Testament Greek *metanoia*. In Classical Greek, *metanoia* meant 'a change of mind' – and several scholars suggest that the term's use in the New Testament should be taken to convey a change in a person's way of thinking that is associated with a changed way of life. The baptism John offered, therefore, involved a complete change in how people understood and related to the world. It was a shaking of that world as powerful as any Isaiah's imagery suggests.

For some that invitation to *metanoia* was a shaking that led to tremendous joy. In turning and following John – and then Christ – they discovered healing and wholeness, a knowledge of God's forgiveness, acceptance and love. They perceived that the one who called them to turn was the one who loved them tenderly, who had said that his coming would lead not only to a display of power, but also to a tender gathering of his flock:

*Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem... Isaiah 40.1*

*See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd:*

*he gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young. Isaiah 40.10-11*

Others responded to Christ's loving offer in fear, with a desire to guard jealously against upheaval or judgement of the way things were – even if the cost was John the Baptist's death, and ultimately Christ's.

Writing after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, the author of 2 Peter anticipates another time of shaking – the day of the Lord's second coming, when *“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.”* (2 Peter 3:10)

He reassures the beleaguered Christians, that for those who have faith, even the destruction of everything that is should not be a cause of fear, for with the ending of the old comes something far better. In an echo of both Isaiah and of the Psalmist's description of a world where *“Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other; Faithfulness springs forth from the earth and righteousness looks down from heaven”* (Psalm 85:10-11), he states:

“In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”

As baptized believers we, like those receiving the letter of 2 Peter, live in the reality of God's Kingdom, which is both 'now and not yet'. In a tumultuous world, it can be easy to be fearful, to want to avoid looking at the radical call to *metanoia* because we fear more challenge and more change.

But like the recipients of prophecy in times past, we can be encouraged. The one who is calling us to *metanoia* this season of Advent – and always – is the one who loves us as a shepherd loves his flock, who was not only born in a stable for us, but was also willing to die for us. He is the one who has promised, and is leading us towards a “new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. 2 Peter 3.14

As we prepare for Christ's coming, then, we ask God's help to live as we are called to live, as citizens of the new Kingdom, longing for its rule of righteousness, peace and faithfulness to express itself in our lives and in our world – and looking forward to the renewal of all things.

Father God,

Help us to trust that you love us with tenderness and seek to carry us close to your heart.

Jesus, Son of God,

Give us faith to live in the light of your coming and your Kingdom.

Holy Spirit of God,

Bless us with the imagination to repent – to see the world differently and to work for a world that reflects your love and justice.

Amen