

## Rebuilding Jerusalem

O.T. Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

### Advent 2

“Comfort, O comfort my people”. These words from Isaiah seem particularly apt for the situation we find ourselves in today. Over these past months, we have been in a depressing dialogue with restrictions, pain, and sadly in some cases, death. The year began well. We felt we were doing fine, and making progress, all by ourselves. But then, by March, the virus had begun to take hold. So we doubled down, did what the government told us, and waited for things to improve. For a while they did. But now we are faced with a long, difficult winter, and while the promise of a vaccine is encouraging, one can’t help wondering when the next crisis may emerge. The questions hang in the air: “How did we get to this point”? “How could we be so vulnerable”? And “Where is God in all this”?

Two and a half thousand years ago, the children of Israel asked similar questions: They have just returned home from exile in Babylon, after travelling hundreds of miles across the wilderness. Finally they arrive at Jerusalem, the city they have told stories and sung about all their lives. Their troubles, they think, are over, but instead they find the city of their dreams to be nothing but a ruin, occupied by less than friendly strangers. Their reaction is natural: How did we get into this mess? What can we do to get out of it? Is it worth bothering?

Isaiah addresses the people: Grass withers and flower fades, but the Lord’s word stands forever. Yes, he says, it is worth bothering, because God is with us. Things may never be as they were but any work done, any building restored, any street cleared is a monument to God. So rise up and prepare the way, “make straight in the desert a highway for our God”.

Those same words are heard five hundred years later, by the oppressed and disillusioned people of Judea. Their country is occupied by the Romans. Taxes are high, including the temple tax. Religious leaders are more interested in keeping their long lists of laws than in caring for the needy. There is a large gap between rich and poor. The people are hungering for spiritual renewal. So when John the Baptist appears in the wilderness with his message of redemption, people flock to see him asking: How did we get to this point?

What can we do to make our lives more meaningful and fulfilling?

We may feel alone and overwhelmed today, but the truth is that our situation is far from unprecedented. Think of the Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which killed one third of the population of Europe. Remember World War One, which wiped out a generation of young men, followed by a further fifty million deaths from Spanish flu in 1918. This is part of the human condition, and an important reminder that we have never been fully in control of our lives.

But that does not mean that we are without hope. As Isaiah and John brought hope to the people of long ago, we too are called to hope through the wilderness to a better future. Hope is a big word. It may mean holding out for desired results, waiting for things to get back to the way we want them to be and trusting God to oblige. But perhaps a better hope would be seeking a way to live faithfully in the present circumstances and to respond to the needs of the moment.

Historically, large crises have forced people to break with the past, to rethink the world which we have made, and to begin anew. This crisis is no different. A surprising thing is happening today. People are beginning to look at society as a whole, and in doing so, to become aware of the large gap between rich and poor and the prejudices which have become part of our being. Our eyes have been opened to the vital work of front line workers in the health service, teachers, bus drivers and refuse collectors, all of whom are poorly paid and many of whom are struggling to make ends meet. We see the racial divide, when a black man in England is four times more likely to die of coronavirus than a white man of the same age. The hope is that we will come out of this crisis less selfish than when we went in, and allow ourselves to be touched by others' pain. Society needs to begin afresh, as John the Baptist suggested long ago to the people who came to seek him out.

There are two themes to John's message: The first is repentance. Repentance does not necessitate sackcloth and ashes. It means looking at our lives and accepting that they need turning around, washing in the clean waters of baptism. It means turning to God and recognising that we are not masters of all we survey. We are his people, called to be good stewards of his creation, and carers of the most vulnerable. In a recent article in the New York Times, Pope Francis put it this way:

“God asks us to dare to create something new. We cannot return to the false securities of the political and economic systems we had before the crisis. We need economies that give to all access to the fruits of creation, to the basic needs of life: to land, lodging and labour. We need a politics that can integrate and dialogue with the poor, the excluded and the vulnerable, that gives people a say in the decisions that affect their lives. We need to slow down, take stock and design better ways of living together on this earth” (The New York Times, Nov. 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

Which brings us to the second part of John’s message: anticipation. Great things are coming he says, but they will be different things. And that applies now, as we look at how respond to the challenges of today, waking each morning and asking, how can I show my best side today? How can I be present for the people of the world in ways that will give them hope?

As Isaiah’s people looked at their ruined city, we look around today and see much of our world spinning out of control. As we look at the wilderness caused by coronavirus, the wrecked world economies, the wildfires and climate change and the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing war, poverty and hunger, we can’t deny that much has been lost. Nevertheless, there is much to be built, and in the comforting words of Isaiah, the Lord is with us. We possess everything and more than any former age possessed: the word of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of the risen Christ. The city which we build will not be the same city that we remember, but it’s a city well worth building.

**Amen**

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6<sup>th</sup> December 2020

