

2nd Sunday in Advent Year B

Isaiah 40.1-11

God's People Are Comforted

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.**

What's going on?

The prophet Isaiah is talking about the coming of God to the people of Israel who have been in exile and captivity in Babylon. God will rescue his people and show them love and compassion. God, says Isaiah, is full of power and might, but also gentle and comforting, like a shepherd looking after lambs. The image of God's glory and power is tempered with the idea of God as protecting and nurturing his people. God is also eternal and unchanging in faithfulness, even though the world is subject to time and everything eventually withers and dies. God is not like that. The task of the prophet is call people's attention to God's saving acts and his promises, to remind them that they should never give up hope or stop trusting God.

Psalm 85.1-2,8-13

Prayer for the Restoration of God's Favour

To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

**LORD, you were favourable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.**

**You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.**

Selah

**Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.**

**Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.**

**Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.**

What's going on?

The psalmist is saying the same things as Isaiah. God forgives his people even when they forget him and wants to bring salvation to them. The faith and love of a holy people will be met and matched by a God who is both faithful and loving. In such a relationship between earth and heaven, there will be peace and the people will prosper.

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. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him.

What's going on?

This important passage answers a question that many people have raised about the Day of Judgement or Second Coming of Jesus. When Jesus talks about it to his disciples, it seems that he was talking about an event that was very close in time, and there is an urgency in some parts of the New Testament that suggests that people expected the end of the world very soon, especially after the events of Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection. 'Surely if God had done this now, so that we might be saved', people thought, then the end of the world must be next. This letter is answering a question about why everything had not yet come to an end.

This letter tells us to remember that God's time is not our time. God understands time differently from us and for God the important thing is that every human being, made in his image, should not be lost to him. So we need time, time to share the gospel and to reach out to others who do not yet know about what Jesus did and all that he told people about how to have a relationship with God. That does not mean that we have so much time that we can be lazy or complacent about our task as Christians, or just leave it to others later on. God has given us a task and it is a real task because time will come to an end. The world will not last for ever. God has promised to remake the universe when the time comes, but that also does not mean we can just let our own world and society go to wrack and ruin while we wait for the world to end. We should make our world a better place and behave as model citizens of that world, because by so doing we are making ourselves fit for heaven.

Mark 1.1-8

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

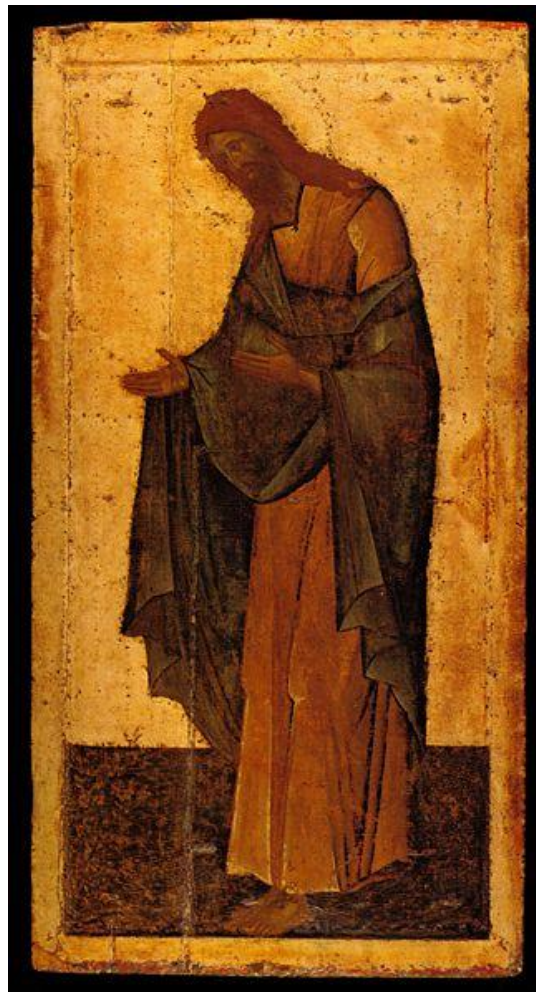
**As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',**

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.'

What's going on?

This passage in the gospel of Mark returns our thoughts to the passage in Isaiah which we heard earlier. The prophet's words are applied to the appearance of John the Baptist. John is thought to have been a religious figure of the time who had a large following and who preached the need for people to focus on God at a time of conflict. He lived an ascetic life (indicated here by the details of his clothing and diet) and performed a ritual of baptism for people wanting to repent and turn back to God. This passage tells us about him. John was in the desert area beyond the towns and cities and was spreading his message to those who came out from the towns to hear what he had to say and to be baptised.

While he was doing this, John began to tell his following about another person who was to appear and who would not only be more powerful and important than John as God's messenger, but would do more than just baptise people as repentance for sin. He would make it possible for people to have an unbreakable spiritual relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Christians, for course, understand John to be talking about Jesus. John's purpose then, was to prepare the way for people to see and recognise Jesus, not only as another prophet but as the Messiah, the Son of God.



John the Baptist