

A Sermon for Advent 2 – Isaiah 40: 1-11 & Mark 1: 1-8 – by Caroline Seaton (06/12/20)

Who remembers the good old days? (i.e. last year!!!) When you could go outside and play; go to town on a Saturday and look through the shop windows at all the goodies tempting us to spend our hard-earned money! And particularly at this time of year as we approach Christmas – there are usually so many things trying to grab our attention and our wallets! The market stalls, with people shouting about all those gadgets that we “need” to make this festive time special – a special bowl for the much loved (or loathed) sprouts, the Christmas adorned table ware, which we can only use at this time of year, and those Christmas jumpers, which convince us we can’t have a good time without them! And in Darlington Street people persuading us as to the “right” car rescue service to buy in to; that “their company” can reduce our energy bills; that “our” party, “our religious persuasion” is the right way forward. Then the TV adverts with people proclaiming their wares, against a backdrop of Christmas bells and idyllic snowy scenes. Proclamations in abundance – but the reality of what is right and what we really need can get drowned out. I suggest that we need to take a moment to think about the kinds of proclamations we should be listening to and where we should be focussing our hearts and minds and attention.

2020 has been very strange – full of official proclamations about what we can and can’t do, where we should and shouldn’t go, who we can and can’t spend our time with. Proclamations the like of which we have never seen before, and which sometimes seem contradictory or lacking logic. As we look forward to the coming of our Lord at Christmas, and trying to work around all these proclamations, our preparation is quite different this year. We have been taken out of our comfort zone of our familiar plans – big family gatherings and Christmas parties. On writing this, we still do not know for certain if we will be able to come together in church at Christmas time. According to the new “rules” it looks like we will be able to be together with our loved ones for a short period of time, and even perhaps give them a hug! Which is a wonderful thought. But focusing on the right here and now, this second Sunday of advent, whether we are together in church or at home online, we are still very fortunate that we have freedom and the tools to be able to worship together. And we shouldn’t forget that. We are blessed to have the opportunity to search our hearts and minds as to the one true meaning of Christ’s birth, leading us to the ultimate sacrifice Christ made for us some 30 years later, of life eternal. And maybe this is the opportunity to think about how we can make this Christmas even more special because of the restrictions.

Our first reading was from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet who lived about 1000 years before Jesus was born. A prophet was someone whom God spoke to and who had the job of persuading people that the way they were living their life was not the best way. Many worshipped idols, squabbled with each other, and did not help those in need, only looking after their own needs. The people needed to hear that God’s way was the only true way and that if they did not listen, they would be faced with lots of horrible disasters. A warning to us too I think of how our lifestyles may infringe on our faith if we are not careful.

Thinking about the context of the reading we heard today, the whole of the Old Testament (where we find the book of Isaiah) is leading us towards the coming of the one who will save the world, and in Isaiah we hear this reinforced: ‘a voice cries out in the wilderness prepare the way of the lord, make straight in the desert a highway for the Lord.’ What a nice, clear proclamation!

When I think of preparing the way and making things straight, I think of a floor strewn with toys or a table groaning under the weight of papers and books! You need to clear a path to get through or be able to use the table. Clear away the things that can trip us up or stop us from doing something. And that’s what God wants us to do during Advent, and in our lives more broadly.

Our second reading is from the gospel of Mark. (Interesting fact: although it is the second gospel in the bible, it is thought to be the first one actually written.) In our reading we heard about a man making a proclamation - that someone is coming who is far greater still than anyone else. That man making that proclamation was John the Baptist. We only hear a little bit about John in this reading – his lifestyle, and the message he gives to the people, which is very similar to the one Isaiah gave all those years ago – someone is coming who will be far greater than anyone else. But what do we know about John the Baptist? I think it would be useful to know a bit more about him, and his context, so we can imagine him, and that might help embed his messages.

As this is a first Sunday service at Christ Church, which offers a more informal style of worship accessible for all ages, we are going to have a short quiz. Now, as we are not live, doing a quiz is going to be more tricky than usual! So, what I am going to do is ask you some questions and give you a few moments to have a think about the answers. Then I will provide the answers. If you were listening careful to our reading from Mark, you will hear some answers, but others will be from other familiar passages we hear at this time of year!

Who was John the Baptist's mother?

His mother was Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, Jesus' mother, who despite being a great age was given the gift of a baby, by God. We hear about her in the gospel of Luke -we hear about the baby who jumped in Elizabeth's womb at Mary's news - that baby was John the Baptist.

Who was his father?

His father was Zechariah – a high priest, and a devout believer.

Where did he live?

John lived in the desert

What did he eat?

He ate honey and locusts

What clothes did he wear?

He wore a coat of camels' hair with a belt around his waist.

Although his appearance and his way of living might not be what you would expect for someone who was worthy of our attention, he was a true and wise follower, and someone that we should continue to listen to.

John was known as the baptiser and he, as Isaiah, had a message for the people. Many People were living life their own way, doing things which were not right. They were being selfish and became used to making excuses for themselves until they were content to live with bad habits and undesirable lifestyles. Sadly, in some cases, this pandemic has shown this trait is still around today. But despite John the Baptist's appearance, the people listened to him. He proclaimed that God would forgive all the bad choices they had made, which would give them a better life, leading them to the kingdom of God. And John's way of preparing the people was through baptism - the symbolic washing away the old lifestyle in the river Jordan. He did this for many thousands of people, and he was doing this to make them ready for the one who would come who was far more powerful. Jesus, the one who had the authority and power to baptise with the holy spirit, affirming the promise of eternal life.

In our second reading we hear Mark quoting Isaiah's great proclamation about preparing the way for the Lord, framing it in another, clear proclamation that Jesus, the son of God, brought the good news. It starts with the line -

The start of the good news foretold throughout the old testament – the faith in which God's people had lived from the beginning of time, bringing together the anticipation and fulfilment of salvation. We hear words of great wisdom in Mark's gospel. He recalls John the Baptist's message that: "the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me, I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the throng of his sandals".

In this proclamation we again hear about the need for preparation for Jesus, and that John's role was that of a servant to the one he was called to serve. And this reminds us that we, too, should be preparing our hearts and minds for God, through acts of service. We might not necessarily go around proclaiming our faith loudly, but in the quiet and unseen deeds that we do for others -we are serving him.

We have heard about a range of proclamations this morning. They can be exciting and seem to offer hope of something better. You "need" this gadget, this festive bowl, this reindeer jumper to have a great festive period. This is the "right" car rescue service to buy in to; you "must" change company to reduce your energy bills; "only our" party or "our religious persuasion" is the "right" way forward. These might be good sales pitches, which grab our attention. But the one true proclamation that we should reflect on, which offers real hope, this advent is 'prepare the way'. We can do this by searching our inner selves, and really being honest with God about our faith, our lifestyles, our priorities and our calling to serve in his name.

This Christmas will certainly take us out of our comfort zone. We might not be able to do the things we have always done, the way we have always done them. But I would urge us all to take this time of advent to reflect on this, this year, and remain grounded in the proclamations that really matter, and the true meaning of the birth of Christ. If we make him the centre of our lives above all else, we will receive the long-awaited proclamation – life eternal in Christ.

John the Baptist leads us in this Advent season to the one who is our Lord, whose birth we await and whose reign in eternity will never end. More than ever, we need this good news. Amen.