***Voice of Comfort* – Sermon on Isaiah 40: 1-11 and Mark 1: 1-8**

**Sunday 10 December 2023 (Rev Phil Wootton)**

The Gospel according to St Mark starts with a bang: ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.’ There’s no messing about with genealogies – that great list of names at the start of Matthew. There’s no flitting around with angels going to ancient priests and newly betrothed girls as in Luke. This none of John’s mystical reflection about the dawn of time. Mark is in there, like a flash: this is good news, and it’s all about Jesus.

EXCEPT … except … immediately he has made that that bold statement (and ‘immediately’ is a word of which Mark is very fond) he’s shot back in time to words written hundreds of years before, to what the prophet Isaiah had to say: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way’ (except, if you look closely, it’s Malachi 3: 1, not Isaiah at all, but Mark’s not interested in such pedantry!) Then we do get to Isaiah 40: 3 – ‘A voice calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him in the desert.’ The point is that although we want to get straight to Jesus, we cannot understand Jesus without knowing what came before him. There are Christian people who would like to get rid of the Old Testament (and with all the genealogies, law codes and accounts of blood baths, you can understand it) but without the history of ancient Israel and Israel’s relationship with her God, Jesus makes no sense what so ever. He’d be just another baby, born in slightly unusual circumstances. Let’s do Advent properly: let’s prepare our minds for Jesus’ coming.

Mark pointed us to Isaiah to introduce Jesus to us, so this morning let’s spend some time meditating on what we’ve heard in Isaiah 40, chewing over that rich poetic language, and trying to absorb something of what it tells us about Jesus coming.

It begins with a simple instruction: ‘Comfort my people,’ says God. It seems God instructing his emissaries to the earth from the court of heaven. Comfort my people. ‘Be tender with them: they’ve suffered a lot. Bring words of kindness, of encouragement, of hope. For their long years of exile are coming to an end. The sins are forgiven that caused their captivity in Babylon; the debt paid. It’s over!’ Of course, it didn’t look like it was over when this message was given. Nothing in their circumstances had yet changed. Bringing the message of comfort will take courage. People will ask what there is to be happy about. Three voices speak boldly of how God is coming to save, and we can hear through them the first sounds of the promise of our Lord Jesus coming to bring forgiveness of sins and to salvation to the world.

The first voice proclaims the coming of the glory of God. It cries out, ‘In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord.’ Centuries later, John the Baptist will fulfil this role, will do the construct work on the Lord’s highway prior to the Lord’s coming. It is not a promising landscape for road building! It’s desert and wilderness, full of rough and rugged places; mountainous, criss-crossed with deep ravines. Who’d build a road here? Nevertheless, a processional route is to be built, straight, true and unimpeded – a route into the hearts of men and women. We think of ‘the Glory of the Lord’ as like the fiery cloudy pillar at the Exodus; or like the erupting fire on Mount Sinai; or like the splendour of the Temple and its worship. But God’s glory is also seen in God’s character, steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and justice. We know too, the glory of God is seen in the face of Jesus Christ, in his humble birth at Bethlehem; in his ministry as an itinerant rabbi; and above all in the glory he revealed on the cross (the glory of perfect love and obedience). The landscape for the highway of the Lord’s coming is unpromising, then as now. It takes a visionary planner to invest in it. The question is whether we have the faith to start clearing the way, or are we creating road blocks and digging potholes on his highway?

The second voice proclaims the coming of the word of God. In contrast with the glory of God, we have human glory which is like grass, or the flower of the field – here today, gone tomorrow. All that we glorify as human beings – whether it’s great power or great wealth, sporting achievement or celebrity status, great beauty or athleticism, spectacular buildings, palaces or fortresses, or even our best efforts at devotion, service and moral character – all this will fall short. All this will pass away. To those besotted with the present age, it may look like God’s word is fading fast, losing its influence and ignored by the masses. But the word of our God will last for ever. And we know the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Although Jesus has returned to heaven, he has left his word. Will we read, mark and obey?

The third voice proclaims the coming of the arm of God. This voice belongs to the herald who runs to the hilltop and sees that a great victory has been won and the victor is now surely on his way. The herald blows the trumpet and announces the new king entering his kingdom: ‘Here is your God!’ He comes with his ‘holy arm’ –, an image of strength and might and powerful rule. ‘God has rolled up his sleeves and is getting on with the job.’ But his might and power are not used like that of other rulers. He comes as the shepherd king – a shepherd who tends his flock, caring for all; a shepherd who gathers his lambs, being sure none have strayed; a shepherd carries them close to his heart: his strong arm is used to care for those in need. We know Jesus as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. We also know that shepherds were amongst those who were first to witness and testify to the Son of God slipping into the world.

‘Comfort my people, says your God.’ Today, God’s people need God’s comfort as much as at any time. The darkness is deep, and most prognoses for the state of the world are bleak. But Christ is coming. It takes courage to say so, and courage to believe his coming makes all the difference. But we can say his coming glory is seen in the most unexpected places. We can say his word is alive and active and undiminished. We can say his mighty strength is seen through care and tenderness. The world is full of voices of despair: can we be voices of hope, even in the wilderness, declaring the way of the Lord?