

Sermon for 10.30 Eucharist, Sunday 4 December 2011

Liverpool Cathedral

Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a & Mark 1:1-8

Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin!

"Comfort ye": one of the great passages of scripture, and one of the best known. Calculated to give all good Anglicans a warm and fuzzy feeling. Advent, after all, is the season when we pop into church for a beautiful service, taking a short break from the shopping frenzy in Liverpool One; we top ourselves up with nice, warm feelings about the coming birth of a lovely little baby, and we forget our troubles for a while: isn't that what this time of year is all about? As comforting as a kitschy Christmas advert, or a nice glass of mulled wine.

Now, of course, it is quite possible to engage with Advent and Christmas on this level: to come to the "Darkness into Light" service because it's a beautiful concert, to be nourished by the sentimental side of our festive traditions. And there is nothing wrong with that as such – in fact we all do it, don't we! myself included – as long as we realise that it's only a tiny part of the whole story. Because those of us who follow Jesus Christ need to be watchful: because if we actually begin our Advent reflections from what the Bible, and what the liturgy, tells us, we will realise that whatever else Christian faith is, and whatever else the message of Advent might be, it is not that kind of comfort that is on offer.

Let's look again at our passage from Isaiah. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." Firstly, who is the speaker here? The speaker is God himself, speaking through the writer of the holy scripture.

Secondly, who is God's intended audience? Who is God talking to? God's audience is ... the prophet Isaiah! Isaiah, and his collaborators, who have been anointed by God to bring the Good News. This is a mandate for a team of prophets, sent out to do God's work in the world. "You there: go and comfort my people," says the Lord. "Be my messenger; speak on my behalf."

Thirdly, what is the context? Well, as I'm sure many of you know, most scholars agree that the section of the book of Isaiah which begins with these amazing words was written during the Babylonian exile: a time of deep despair for the people of Israel – a time of military failure, economic collapse, forced depopulation – more than that, a time of disillusionment, of fallen idols ... specifically, the idol of a "chosen people", comfortable in the mistaken assurance that they could count on God's material and spiritual support, no matter how they actually behaved!

Fourthly then, what is the message that our team of prophets are to deliver? Well, it comes in two parts. First, a dose of spiritual realism: "all people are grass; their constancy is like the

flower of the field which fades and disappears.” This is a funny kind of comfort, isn’t it? A negative comfort, a hard truth. But in order to hear God’s message of comfort, we must first be totally realistic about how much we are in need of it. And then comes the punch-line: “The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together”. This is the comfort that is on offer: God is coming to dwell with his people, coming on the desert road, coming to the heart of their exile. And so, if they are to find hope, it will not be in the things of this world – but in the promise of a supernatural salvation, God’s glorious presence at the heart of a new community of justice and of peace.

So: what can we take away from this passage? What might God be telling us today? Well, it seems to me that there are only two possibilities. Either we are the people who are in need of being comforted, the ones (like those to whom Peter writes in our second reading) who think that God has abandoned them, and that there is nothing to hope for ... Or we are the prophets, the ones who are anointed by God to be comforters, pointing people to God’s supernatural salvation in Jesus Christ, and making God’s church a place where the kingdom of justice and peace is starting to become visible.

The one thing that is not available to us in this scenario is a comfortable middle position, a flabby neutrality. Christian comfort is not armchair comfort. It’s not illusory (like the Christmas advert) or temporary (like that glass of mulled wine) – it’s real and durable, there is nothing more real – but it’s a converting comfort; a creative, demanding comfort; a comfort that doesn’t leave you where you are.

So Isaiah’s message, for those of us who have heard the Good News, is in fact a message of conversion and of commission. Of course, we all need to go on hearing that message too. We will never reach a comfortable plateau in our relationship with God, and we all need to fall to our knees, in penitence and fear, to receive what one of our prayers of absolution calls the “grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit”. But those of us who have heard are also faced with a choice. Because the Good News is a call to public responsibility, to membership of a new community, and to a new way of behaving, characterised by the worship of God, by testifying to what he has done for us, and by service of others. And this is why our entry into Christian life is not a private decision or a personal choice, but a very public act of witness – celebrated at the heart of our community – which we call baptism.

Which brings us to our Gospel. A Gospel in which Mark, like all the New Testament writers, tells the story of the Good News of Jesus in the language of the Old Testament. And Mark of course begins with Isaiah, with the prophetic commission that we have just heard. The Lord is coming to his people, coming on the desert road, coming to the place of repentance and conversion; and John, his messenger, is there – just like Isaiah – simply to point beyond himself to the supernatural glory that is on the way.

So this is why John describes the baptism he offers as inadequate, as a half-measure. John’s water baptism is a visible symbol of the desire for repentance and for purity. But there is a

second stage, which only God in person can accomplish: a prophetic anointing with the Holy Spirit, the same anointing that Isaiah and the prophets received – so that all who repent and turn to God can first be purified, and then supernaturally equipped for the commission that is laid upon them. Baptism in the Holy Spirit: being soaked, inundated, with the power and the presence and the gifts of God – and then, being sent out in the power of the Spirit to proclaim the Good News to the poor; sent out to be comforters.

This, of course, is why there are churches – such as the Baptists or the Pentecostals, but also the churches of the Patristic period – where adult baptism is or was regarded as normative, because baptism is seen as a radical commitment that requires a wholehearted adult choice. It's a view of baptism that sees it as something more like our modern idea of ordination! Now, I am not questioning the Anglican practice of baptising children – because we as Anglicans recognise our journey of faith is something that we grow into, never simply a one-off decision; and – above all – because baptising children is a reminder that faith is not something that we do, not a cognitive process for grown-ups, but a gift from God depending on his initiative and his grace. But I will say that, theologically speaking, baptism – if it is to be all it should be – must be ratified and carried through, not simply by the liturgical rite of confirmation (important as that is), but by our existential orientation: by a true and profound repentance, by an openness to God's commission, and by the conviction of the reality of his personal indwelling by his Spirit, without which none of us are able to do what God asks of us.

And this is why, over the last fifty years, many in our more traditional churches – through courses like the Alpha Course, now widely used in the Church of England; but also, in the Roman Catholic Church, through key figures like Cardinal Suenens (who chaired the Second Vatican Council) and Raniero Cantalamessa (currently preacher to the Pontifical Household) – have started to rediscover the language of “baptism in the Holy Spirit”, and to propose ways in which adult Christians can take this step. Because what our world needs is not human comfort, but supernatural hope; and if we, as God's church, are to fulfil our calling to be a nation of prophets, every one of us is going to need some supernatural help.

Now, I hope you don't go away from this sermon thinking that I don't appreciate mulled wine. In fact, I like it very much. Mulled wine is convivial; mulled wine is warming; mulled wine is safely pasteurised; it has a relatively low alcohol content; it's a comforting drink. And in fact, mulled wine can be an excellent tool for building up the Christian community. But the mulled wine of our comfortable church traditions is not sufficient fuel for our mission – mulled wine is not the new wine of Pentecost – and it's the new wine of Pentecost with which we need to be filled, if we are to be equipped by God to be comforters, to walk in the footsteps of John and Isaiah, to proclaim the coming of the glory of the Lord to a world which waits for him in darkness. Amen.