

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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## ADVENT 2 - THE NEED TO PROCLAIM

10<sup>th</sup> December 2017

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

Today we have read two very familiar Advent texts, words which you have most likely heard many times before. Words about words, as it happens, because one of the things which links our two readings is that they are about speaking, proclaiming, crying out, or lifting up the voice. Last week, at the beginning of Advent, we thought about our need of God in the world, and the wonderful news that God has come to us and remains with us. Today we think about the need to proclaim, to get the message out.

If we had had a third reading today – asking extra from the Reader! – I would have chosen Romans 10:13-14, which says this: *For “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? Which are good questions. How are people to call on God’s name, to know God’s vital presence, if they do not hear about him, if the message does not reach them?*

So, the second Sunday of Advent is about getting the message out there. Of course, the first question to answer is “What message?” What is it that needs to be told? And if we look through Isaiah, we will find that there is more than one message which is to be proclaimed.

First of all, and maybe most vitally, there is a message of comfort. “Comfort my people”. This is a terribly important thing to be spoken and heard. How many people think that God only comes to us with a big stick, to tell us what we have done wrong, to chastise us? How many people live with guilt at their heart, hidden, maybe, but powerful, as it tells them that they are no good, that they are not worth anything, that they can never do anything or be anything worthwhile? How many people avoid church, and avoid the places where traditionally they might hear the good news, because they think that it is not for them; either because they are not good, or because they believe that the news is not good.

But the prophet, in a new section of Isaiah’s work, tells that the chastisement and blame of the past is finished and God comes to us with comfort. This is what a broken and battered people need. They needed it back then and they need it still. Comfort. We live in a world of broken and battered lives, and while there is a place for correction, there is first of all a great need to be comforted.

The comfort we are talking about is a verb, not a noun. It is not comfort like an easy armchair, but comfort like an arm around the shoulder, like a hand helping you up, like a finger gently wiping away your tears. It is the comfort of loving presence, the comfort of someone who believes in you, the comfort of someone who says, “Never mind if you have failed, I know you can do it.” It is the kind of comfort which, rather

than lying you down in bed, lifts you back on your feet, with a smile on your face and with courage to take on life again, because you are not alone. The beginning of the gospel, the good news which needs to be proclaimed is a message of comfort to all who need it.

The next thing that is cried out, proclaimed, is the need to build. We find this in both of our Scriptures. "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord!" In the wilderness. God is not coming in the well-trodden paths of religious practice. God is not coming where we think he ought to be. He is coming in the wilderness. He is coming to people who are in the wilderness. The wilderness is where you don't find happy, friendly society. It is where people feel alone, where life is difficult, where it is a struggle to survive. And it is to people who live in the wilderness, even if they live in cities or in large families or in tight-knit communities, that the good news is coming.

The good news is not just coming for those whom we might expect to hear it – you, sitting here this morning, for instance. The word that is coming to you, is the word of challenge, to get out there and proclaim. The good news is for those who live in hard places, in difficult circumstances, those who feel cut off, forgotten by the world. And your task is to make sure that they know that they are not forgotten and that they do matter, and that the comfort of God is waiting for them. The good news is for those who never darken the door of a church, because it would never occur to them that there might be anything for them there, and who struggle on with their lives alone. But how will they hear without someone to proclaim to them?

And then the prophet says, "A voice says, "Cry out!" and I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are like grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field." And this sounds a bit more like what some people might expect from God – a word that chides, that points out our shortcomings. Only that is not the end of the thought. The thought goes on "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."

One of the things we are to proclaim is the constancy of God. His word stands for ever. The ancient prophet would mean the written law of God when he said this. The law which, while demanding obedience also contained many promises of God's love and faithfulness. But when we come to the New Testament we find that God's word has become more than a text set in stone – literally in the case of the ten commandments! God's Word has become a living thing, a person, who speaks and shows God's word with every word he speaks and everything he does and is. God's word has become Jesus. And the Word of our God will stand forever. Jesus is for all time.

Part of what we have to proclaim, this Christmas and always, is that Jesus isn't just a historical figure, relevant for his time, one who shaped the future of the world, especially the Western world, which is what many people think. No, the Word of our God stands for ever. Jesus still speaks God's word to us. The word of God is still as relevant today as it ever was, giving comfort to those who feel bruised and broken, bringing God's presence to those who live a wilderness experience of loneliness.

So much that needs to be told, so much that we are challenged to take out there to those who do not know, who have not realised that this message is for now and for them. No wonder the prophet urges us to get up on a high mountain and yell – or as he says "Lift up your voice with strength!" We are to tell of God, to show God, to say – look, here is your God! And to what do we point when we do that? We point to a manger, to a baby, to a human birth and a human story.

Here is the God who comforts you and will always be with you – he can be because he became one of us. Here is the God who comes unexpectedly in the wilderness where people live hard, lonely lives: he can, because he became one of us. Here is the God who knows that we are not strong, that we are not constant, that our lives are frail things, and who offers us his constancy: he can, because he became one of us. His becoming one of us is the reward and recompense that the prophet says he brings with him. The reward of his presence, the recompense of never having to live our troubled, feeble lives alone.

Here is your God, who comes as one of us to feed us, as a shepherd does. A few weeks ago, I came upon Michael Slaney feeding his sheep. He showed me how he could call them by name – though the name he had given to his favourite was in fact “Number One!” He called, and they came, and he fed them with a few treats from his own hand before he filled their trough. Michael does not have a large flock to feed, which is why he can give them personal attention. God does have a large flock, but he comes to each one of us as though we were the only one for whom he had to care, and calls us by name. He sees when we are limping and if we need it, he carries us. This is the God we proclaim.

Advent, remember, is not to be a passive time of waiting, but an active time; and the lessons we learn in these weeks are for the whole of our lives. So this week the challenge to us is to consider how we can best proclaim our God of comfort and presence, of faithfulness and love. How we can proclaim him to those who have yet to hear in a way that helps them understand that this God is for them, not just for those who are already in the church.

How are we to speak, sing, live, write, dance, paint, help, give so that the message is broadcast, and not just given out, but also taken in? Amen.

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