

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

The Song of Advent

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Isaiah 40: 1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Every film that is made has a sound-track, often one which is so powerful that just hearing a few bars and you are at once transported to the world of the film, and the story it tells. You hear the *Chariots of Fire* music and at once you are one the beach in St. Andrews. You hear the rhythm of the *James Bond* theme and you sit up and watch out for spills. The aim of the composer is to not only capture the mood of the film, but also to help set and underline it.

We may not hear it as such, but there is also a steady rhythm which is the soundtrack of Advent. A rhythm, a music which is dark and threatening, written in a minor key, giving the undertone of fear. In this time we live in it is a very contemporary music - but perhaps every age has said that. Yet when we read in Advent about the need for comfort, about people walking in darkness, about human flesh being like grass, withering and perishing so easily, we know what is meant. We can easily conjure pictures of war, of the earthquakes which have in this past year so devastated parts of the world, of economic insecurity and the ways that its fears can break out on the streets, and of physical insecurity at all levels.

"*Long is our winter*" goes one Advent song, "*Dark is our night. O come set us free, O saving light.*" We know the soundtrack to advent, and it is one, as we saw last week, of longing. We long for God to be seen at work among us. We long for Christ to come, to come again, to remake the world and make all thing right and new. "*O come, O come Emmanuel*" again the advent song is one of longing, of the need of light in darkness and hope in despair.

Yet there is also heard God's song winding its way through the valleys, "Comfort, comfort my people." We heard it loud and clear in today's reading from Isaiah. In this music the Advent longing is wrapped around with God's response, and so the sad longing of the minor key is transposed to the brightness of the major. It is a song of deepest longing, wrapped round a promise and a strength that is God in these times. God in these times, these times of ours. The hope of Advent is not just a hope for the past: the promises of the prophets that God would send his Son, which promise was fulfilled two thousand years ago.

It is not just a promise for the future, that one day Christ will come again and restore all things.

It is a promise for the here and now as well. It is God at work in the insecurity that we know, and that we see and empathise with in the lives and fates of others around the world. In this context the word "comfort" is not necessarily about stability and luxury but the fulfilment of a promise, the promise of Emmanuel, God with us.

For the Hebrews that promise was of freedom in exile; comfort was the hope of change and trust in God recreating their world. That was the promise that Isaiah sang of, sang to a people who lived in the distress and hopelessness of exile.

For the people of the early church, living as they did under the uncertainty of Roman rule, never sure when trouble might break out against them because of their faith, what they longed for was Jesus to come again. They missed him. Some of them had known him actually with them - like Peter had - and they missed him. They longed for the time when he would return to set them free

from all their troubles and wind up the injustices of this world, making a new heaven and a new earth. The longed for this so much that they began to ask when it would be, why didn't he hurry up?

And people have asked that ever since. Wouldn't it be better that Jesus should hurry up and end all the suffering of this world by bringing to birth the new heaven and new earth that we are promised. Wouldn't it be better for the Kingdom of God to take complete control, quickly? Why doesn't God hurry up?

Peter had an answer to the question, an answer which he found in the praises of the book of Psalms. Psalm 90:4 says *"For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night."* So Peter tells the impatient believers - then and now - *"With the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day."* (v:8). Peter wanted to stop the impatience of his readers becoming so all-consuming that they forgot to live lives of faith and faithfulness. He wanted to end speculation as to when and how Christ would return, so it is ironic that this statement of his has often been used in what you might call "divine arithmetic" to try to calculate the date of the Second Coming.

Peter wants to remind people that though the advent theme is one of longing, God's music is one of promise, one of God himself at work in these times, imperfect though they may be. And if God is at work in these times, then our task is to work with him, to take up his song and sing it as we do his work in his world. So Peter urges the impatient to be patient and to work. To live lives of holiness and goodness, to be found without spot or blemish. Peter says this in contrast to those who are false prophets among God's people, bringing in destructive opinions, being greedy and revelling in what is wrong. Such people, Peter calls blots and blemishes (2:13). But if we are found to be working with God in our waiting we will be like those without blemish, perfect with the perfection of Christ.

If our lives help to transform the world, if they shine the light of God into the dark places, if they smooth out the humps and dips so that there is an obvious highway for God in the world, then we can be said to be hastening Christ's return. We can be said to be part of God's promise fulfilled in the here and now.

For what is God's promise? Surely it is that he does not want to lose anyone, but that all should come to know him and love him and live in his way, by his Spirit! Surely it is to feed his flock like a shepherd, to gather the lambs in his arms and carry them, and gently lead the mother sheep. Peter certainly thinks so.

Shepherding is not instantaneous work. A shepherd has to learn to be patient as he tends his flock and looks after them. Shepherding is not a spectator sport - except in the form of sheepdog trials, which is more about the dogs than the sheep. Normal everyday shepherding does not look exciting and is repetitive. The casual observer coming across a shepherd at work might not understand what is going on or why. The best way to understand is to take up the work yourself.

So it is with God's work. It is not always or even often spectacular. It only rarely grabs headlines. Most often it is repetitive, and done in quiet corners of life. God works with people where they least want public light to shine: the the parts of their lives which cause them pain or shame. If we are to do his work, then we too must quietly win the right to enter these difficult places with others, and help them bring them to the light of God's love. To allow that to happen, very often with people we have to revisit the same places and thoughts and feelings again and again. The results are healing, transforming, but often not talked-about. They are a matter of quiet gratitude and relief, more often than of public celebration.

God asks us to work with him, to live lives of which he would not be ashamed, working for the salvation of everyone, one by one. When we engage in God's work, we learn the patience of the divine shepherd. We learn to have the same burning desire that not one should be lost. We learn, like the shepherd in Jesus story of the lost sheep, to rejoice over each one who finds their home in the flock of God.

At the season of Advent, the world goes into a kind of overdrive of preparation. It rushes headlong towards Christmas and then ends up with a flat, empty feeling on Boxing Day - and don't you just hate that? Peter is confronting that feeling of rush, of wanting to hasten to the good times and his message is one of patience and perspective. Why rush, he seems to be saying, when so much more can be achieved with patience? Why rush? he might ask of our Advent preparations, isn't there enough of that already?

When Jesus was facing the time of suffering and death which was to win our salvation and ensure us of a place in God's family, and seat at his table, he might have been excused if he had wanted to rush at the difficult time to get it over with. But he didn't. Instead he took time to meet with his friends around the supper-table and to love them and teach them and try to help them understand and find comfort in the bewildering events that were to overwhelm their lives.

As we gather around the Lord's table today, let us ask ourselves, let us tell to God the loving shepherd what comfort we long for, desire, and walk towards? It may be something that is personal to you, to do with your most private life. It may be something you long for for your family or for a friend, it may be something you long for for the nation or the world. It could easily be all of these things. The music of Advent is music of longing, and hearing it stirs up our longings in us.

But let us also listen for the music of God's promise, the music of God at work in the world, not just then, not just sometime, but now.

Amen