

Sunday 7 December 2008: Second Sunday of Advent

Highways of communication

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' Isaiah 40:3

My attention was arrested by these words after a toast, with friends of mine, the Father and Mother of a new child. He had been born, unexpectedly, with Downs Syndrome, (she wasn't an age of high risk). This had given them a great deal to think and feel about – they'd been through the whole range of emotions during his first couple of months, not being sure what was about having their first child and what was specific to his condition. But as part of their exploration into how they could help him to develop most fully they had been to a special school which trained parents to work with their children from a very young age to do exercises to open and stimulate their 'highways of communication' – the neural pathways which we all have and which respond and enlarge the more we exercise them. I'd been reading about this at work – it did make sense that the more you exercise a particular way of thinking the better you get at it, just like muscles. It fits with the ideas about sudoku keeping your brain active as you age and London cabbies having an enlarged hippocampus from learning 'The Knowledge'.

For my friends this would mean intensive exercises – both mental and physical - with Jem, their son, three times a day every Saturday for the next six years, and there was no question about their commitment to do it. And as I spent time with them I could see all the work going on around opening up other highways of communication – how were family and friends responding to Jem and his condition, how did they respond to a TV documentary which ended with the shock figures about the increase in people in Spain choosing not to have Downs babies (they're Catalans) – unlike, it turns out, the situation in the UK where the figures are going in the other direction.

And then, just as I was starting to turn my attention to this sermon, I got caught in the floods – the highest *acqua alta* in 30 years - in Venice, where I'd taken my Mum. During breakfast the water started seeping in to the dining room, and we spent the morning watching people who needed to wading around in thigh high water, urgently trying to protect their shops and hotels and cafes from the rising tide. Suddenly those beautiful highways of communication in Venice, whether the canals or the little streets, were overwhelmed, and cutting people off instead of joining them up.

So obviously this got me thinking about this picture in Isaiah. How do you make straight a highway for God? What are the things that block the highway of communication between us and God and what opens it up? These questions seem pretty central to the work of Advent.

The first thing seems to be about *comfort*. It's very difficult to open up a line of communication with anyone if we are full of fear. The writer is asking the prophets, some think the angels, to speak tenderly to Jerusalem in their time of exile. My friends were amazingly clear about their sense of Jem as differently gifted, but they needed the room to be able to express their sense of difficulty and loss too about not having a 'normal' child. True comfort allows grief and loss and difficulty to be expressed, but it stays there with them in the grief and testifies to the hope beyond.

On the other hand, comfort can't happen unless we realise the road is blocked. If we're in denial about death or disability, the comfort can't begin. If we don't know our arteries are blocked, the blood will stop flowing round the veins and arteries, the highways of communication round our bodies, and suddenly there's a heart attack. The first Isaiah, widely agreed to have written chapters 1-39, has had that job to do consistently, to try to get through to the exiles from Jerusalem what in their actions has cut off their highway of communication with God and led to the loss of their homeland and their dreadful suffering at the hands of the Babylonians. Or for those left behind, their terribly reduced circumstances without the brightest and best of their generation. But now this is abundantly clear, and the second writer in the book of Isaiah has a different message, which needs to start with tenderness. It's going to be alright. It does look as though disaster has arrived, there is not much worldly sign of things improving, but this is not the whole picture because God is in the picture.

Well, we don't need too much convincing in our current context of the fragility of human life. The grass withers, the flower fades, the pensions shrink, the jobs disappear. It's very easy for people to get fatalistic, depressed, to start to be ruled by fear and even panic. To start to doubt that it is possible to trust in God's providence and provision any more. I am amazed how quickly I can start to think like this – especially when I then remember that I'm one of the world's wealthy ones and how much more challenging it is on a daily basis to trust in God's provision for most in this country, let alone the two thirds world.

So it's not hard to feel guilty in this situation. And fear has to do with the prospect of punishment. The message the prophets (and the angels?) are to give to the exiles of Jerusalem (and the beleaguered remnant left behind) is that the punishment is over – God is going to do something new – and it involves the creation of this new highway.

Second Isaiah's hearers would have thought of The King's Highway, which I recently read described as 'a perilous and wondrous journey that traversed the Sinai desert, wound through the ravines of Petra and across mountain ranges, fighting heat, thirst, stubborn camels and bandits along the way.' Amazingly thanks to the virtual highway of the internet, you can follow the way online.

I had my own experience travelling through Sinai desert, going to visit Mount Sinai. We missed the bus, took a dodgy taxi, at the hottest time of the year, and as we travelled watched a huge juggernaut go thundering by at great speed. Later we heard a loud crash. We travelled past its carcass on our return.

Highways connect peoples and cultures. Israel is at a crossroads of trade routes and political and military ones, as if we needed reminding. Highways are vital to territorial power as the road building of the Romans demonstrated. The question of 'Who controls the highways,' whether oilpipes across Russia or checkpoints on the road to Bethlehem, is key. We hear of many journeys along sections of the Highway in the biblical narrative, some of them dangerous as in the story of the Good Samaritan.

So what does it take to open up a highway for God. From what I've just described, perhaps the first thing to say is that *we need to give God control*. If the valleys which need filling in represent our fear and despair, perhaps the mountains which need levelling can represent our own pride, our own sense of autonomy and selfishness. They don't look alike, but often they are two sides of the same coin, made from the same earth. It hit me hard to read Sr Wendy Beckett's words about how clinging to regrets and a sense of blame was a terribly arrogant thing to do. Who do I think is greater, God's forgiveness or me?

The uneven ground shall be made level and the rough places a plain. But the building work has to be start with the real raw material. We can't avoid using the reality of who and where we are as the starting point – so this becomes the window of opportunity rather than of despair.

Second Isaiah points to the Word of God as what stands for ever in the face of bad change, what can open and re-open the highway to God through the prophets. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. *We hear the call, along with the prophets, to be openers of the highway.*

Nowhere is there a more beautiful portrait painted of the honour of being a messenger, a witness, of the mixture of power and gentleness with which God comes to us, of the tender attention to the most vulnerable people and places in that loving image of the shepherd gathering the lambs in his arms and the sounds of Handel which echo through us as we hear them.

But it is no privatised pastoral picture. All this is firmly in the context of a vision of the transformation of the world that ALL will see – whatever their faith or background. The Glory of the Lord shall be revealed. All people see it together. It is Public. It will connect us to everyone so we can no longer think about ourselves in isolation. And it has already begun.

It does stand alone, wonderfully, and yet, as Mark verblessly (breathlessly?) reminds us before quoting this very passage, this is just 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'

Enter John the Baptist, with his own highway making programme, which he is conducting through preaching and baptising with a gospel of repentance, and pointing to Jesus. One book which made a deep impact on me is a 'The Shape of Living' by David Ford. In it, he argues that life is a series of overwhelmings – whether it is a visually and physically obvious one, like a flood, or a bereavement, or falling in love, or whatever else completely overtakes our usual ways of operating. The big question is which overwhelming will we allow to shape the rest? And for a Christian, the answer is baptism, that decision to allow following Jesus and surrendering our lives to God to be the primary overwhelming. The imagery of immersion couldn't speak more directly to us.

Of course St Mark is the evangelist symbolised by a magnificent lion, and this is the great saint and symbol of Venice. Walking round the Doge's Palace, I became vividly aware of how Mark (and his bones) had been annexed to position Venice as a major power. Rome had Peter, Venice needed a serious player, they got a gospel writer as well as an apostle to undergird their status and seriousness. Poor Theodore, their original dragon slaying saint, was left stranded at the top of a pillar. The magnificent frescoes and pictures, many with beautifully rendered Christian themes, painting an amazingly sophisticated narrative of an astonishingly early Christian democracy, somehow still end up speaking more of the Doge and his splendour than drawing us to God.

Which raises the question, '*How do we view the lion of God's word?*' Is it going to be one we annex to be a mouthpiece for our own political and personal views and desires or one who roams free, able to challenge us, to make the rough places smooth? It's not a tame lion

And in this new order which Mark proclaims, *how will we prepare for the coming of the living Word*, who will start to bring in God's kingdom with an entirely new and unexpected dimension of power and tenderness, reveal the glory of God and overwhelm us not just with

the water of repentance, but with the fire of the Spirit. Will we strengthen the pathways of faith, not fear, of the spirit of thanksgiving which gets us used to recognising the provision and work of God, which practices an attitude of contentment 'whether we abase or abound.' Will we be ready and available for the power which will course through that highway of communication and connectedness to God?