

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Second Sunday of Advent Yr B 7 December 2008

Isaiah 40.1-11 Psalm 85.1-2, 8-13 2 Peter 3.8-15a Mark 1.1-8

It's a standard joke in the UK that the Queen thinks the whole world smells of fresh paint! Wherever she goes the whole place is spruced up, ready for her visit. We get ready for the arrival of important people; or at least, the people who matter to us. 'Get ready!' is the message of John the Baptist in Mark's gospel. 'Get ready! God is about to do something new', John said, and people started taking notice. They took notice because at that time there was a heightened expectancy that *something* was going to happen. The Jewish people were living under Roman occupation. Many wanted a messiah who would lead a military style revolt against the occupiers. They were zealous to drive the pagans from the promised, holy land. Others had fled the world and gone to live in a community at a place called Qumran. They wanted to be 'pure' enough to be part of God's next action plan.

John was calling people back to old acts of God, the exodus from slavery in Egypt and the return of the exiles from Babylon in Iraq. John was drawing on the words of the prophet Isaiah to remind people that God had acted in the past and would act now – and act decisively. What people needed to do to be ready was to be baptised, John said. So he plunged them into the river Jordan. (His nickname was more like 'John the Plunger') It was a symbolic recrossing of the Red Sea, that seemingly impossible hurdle on the journey to the place of God's promise. The way to be ready was to remember what God had done in the past – that means, to remember God's characteristic way of behaving and be looking for God to do the same kind of thing, to be that same faithful God, once more. For the Jewish people remembering always meant making the past present now.

So, what do you make all the talk in Advent of 'the day of the Lord' and 'the coming of God' in decisive action? Do you find it irrelevant? Do you wonder if these days it's not out of date and certainly not what sensible people expect. It is hard to take seriously, especially when some Christians talk about the 'end times' and the 'last days' as a way of explaining world crises. People have said that in every crisis since the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD! Such people usually reckon God's coming will be terrible for everyone else but them and the other people who believe what they believe. They use the imagery of God's coming as a threat and a big stick. Maybe that's what you fear when you hear such imagery read in church. There is a lot of nonsense spruiked by people who are basically unaware of how to read the scriptures with informed eyes and minds.

Here is an aside: It is possible to read the scriptures without knowing much about them and find them profoundly truthful and wise about human life and about God. But an uninformed reading does not exhaust the meaning of the scriptures. There is always more to be discovered. And sometimes there is a truthful way to read, and a false one.

So, what's the alternative way of looking at God's coming in power? Let's go back to Isaiah and those words of comfort to the exiles in Babylon and the ragged remnant in ruined Jerusalem. God speaks words of comfort. God speaks to those who fear that all is lost; who wonder if God has not abandoned them. God speaks of the way home

being made straight and plain, not rough and uneven. God speaks of being like a shepherd who will carry the lambs in his arms if they cannot walk alone. God promises that though we are inconstant, God will prove faithful and these things will come to pass. This is no threat. It is a promise. As we know the exile did end and Jerusalem was rebuilt, though the people soon forgot God's fidelity and put their trust in yet more politics only to be captives in their own land under the Romans by the time John appears crying out like that old voice in the wilderness.

So, this coming of God is a coming for our good and not our harm. Turn around – repent, John called out, turn away from all that is not of God. (Repent means 'turning around' not grovelling.) We hear that call today inviting us to do the same. Wake up to the future being offered to us now. It's offered to us in Jesus of Nazareth who appeared at the Jordan one day and was recognised by John as God's presence come at last when he plunged Jesus under the water and the anointed one of God arose wet and dripping.

All this had been promised, not to frighten or alarm but so that God's coming can be believed in and expected. The scriptures promise a new earth and a new heaven when all God's promises are complete – how I do not know so I will not speculate. Since it is a great mystery it is easy for the scare merchants to manipulate people into a kind of (in truth, false) faith with their speculation about God's intentions. God's purposes are not just for each of us as individuals but for the whole creation, of which humanity is the crown and the scourge.

We know that God comes in many ways now, today, and we trust that since God is trustworthy God will continue to come to us. God will come to us in bread and wine if we just put out our hands to make it possible. God will come to us in the kindness of a friend or the sudden insight about ourselves as the light of Christ shines into the dark recesses of our hearts. God comes in the hope we experience and in the longing for a just world without want or fear of the worst we humans do to one another.

There is nothing to fear – for what is there about us God does not already know? We pray and acknowledge before God that God is the One 'unto whom all hearts are open, from whom no secrets are hidden' and God still loves us. There is everything to look for and anticipate now as we wait for what will yet be.

'Comfort, comfort' the prophet cried and along came Jesus, suddenly appearing one day, but recognised only by those watching for his coming. He will not only be the lamb of God who bears what we cannot the sin which holds us back from God, he will be the good shepherd who seeks us when we are lost to ourselves or imagine we are beyond God's reach. He will not only show us the way to God but he has become the way. There is nothing to fear in the coming of God; nothing; nothing at all.

Colleen O'Reilly