

“BE STRONG, DO NOT FEAR”

Isaiah 35:1-10

The past couple of weeks have seen a number of special days and festivals. It's only a fortnight since we were here celebrating Christmas Day. Then there was St Stephen's Day (or Boxing Day, as it's now known by most people), and we've had New Year's Eve, New Year's Day, and a couple of Bank Holidays, and Friday was the Feast of Epiphany, when we remember the visit of the wise men to Jesus. But I wonder if anyone knows what was noteworthy about this last Tuesday (3rd January). Well, according to a bunch of experts somewhere or other, Tuesday 3rd January 2012 was the Most Depressing Day of the Year.

There are, of course, several factors involved in that. It was the day many people returned to work after the Christmas and New Year break. But also, according to the article about it that I read in the *Express & Star* that evening, it's the day when people start looking at the year ahead and worrying about what's going to happen. And, it seems, there's plenty to worry about this year. Watching a DVD of a concert by Leonard Cohen, I was struck by the words of his song *The Future* and the refrain, “*I've seen the future, brother, and it's murder.*” Now, I have to say that the combination of reading the *Express & Star* and listening to Leonard Cohen at any time of the year is not likely to raise your spirits and get you dancing, and when it's pouring with rain outside on a dark January evening then you can see that the depression experts have a point!

But the issue was put into stark focus again when I looked at the prayers that were written and stuck on the 2012 display last Sunday. There were quite a lot which asked for God's help with difficult situations regarding jobs, health, finances and relationships. And the television and radio news programmes have been greeting the political and economic affairs of 2012 with grim foreboding – crises in the Eurozone and various war zones, continuing austerity, the spectre of last year's riots and unrest still hovering in the background. It seems that looking into the foggy future of this new year is an exercise full of gloom and despair. We'll all experience that in some way or other – and many of you here this morning will have to make very difficult decisions which will also affect other people, in your jobs, in your roles within the church, in your positions within the community. It's all a bit scary.

So what do we do? Well, as good Christians we can pray, and we can look into the Bible for some guidance, some encouragement. We've just done that this morning as we've read from *Isaiah 35*. Those of you who were here before Christmas will remember (I hope) that we dipped into this Old Testament book of prophecy several times during Advent. And one of the things we noted was that the prophet Isaiah was chosen to proclaim God's words to a people who were very fearful indeed about the future. Those who first heard his words, God's people in Israel and particularly Judah, were in a situation much

more frightening than we are today. Surrounded by the superpowers of the day, they were economically, politically and militarily very vulnerable and it wouldn't be long, in fact, before they were completely overrun and marched off into exile, deported to a country far from the familiar comfort of their homeland. In the next couple of chapters we read about the threat that the Assyrian King Sennacherib posed to the city of Jerusalem. Here, then, we might find some help as to how we should deal with our own crises of hope and confidence.

God tells Isaiah that he is to encourage the people who felt very weak and powerless (*"feeble knees ... hands that give way ..."*) and to speak to those *"with fearful hearts"*. His message is concise and positive: *"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come ... he will come to save you."* It's going to be alright. Everything will turn out fine. I suspect Isaiah was not treated with a great deal of respect when he preached that message with the mighty Assyrian army parked on the border. It would all have seemed a bit pie-in-the-sky, a bit like one of today's political commentators or business correspondents appearing on television and saying that we'll all be fine by July, so don't worry about anything.

But Isaiah's exhortation to look up and stop worrying is couched in a wonderfully poetic vision of the transformation that God will effect for his people. It's a glimpse of his kingdom, of his benevolent rule over his people which was at the heart of what Jesus was to teach several centuries later. God will transform the desert into flower beds and allotments. The whole of the created order will spring into life and fill the world with colour and joy. He talks of Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon, bywords for luxury and abundance. Water will burst out of the rocks in the wilderness and those who struggle with physical limitations and disease will be healed. Suddenly life will be full of joy and peace.

God will even build a highway across the desert so that his people can walk safely and easily into his presence. It will be like those causeways across the desert landscape that are highly visible and completely safe for those on them. Eventually they will be reunited with their God – for them it was like going to Zion, to the holy city – and the chapter finishes with the prophet saying, *"Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."* God is showing his power in his world, ushering in his kingdom, offering a future that is characterised not by despair and insecurity, by anxiety and pain, but by joy and wholeness. As one writer puts it, *"Joy is always a by-product of God in his world"* (Oswalt NICOT).

Part of the problem, I believe, for our gloomy outlook on life, for our worry about the future, is that we have left God out of it all. Preferring to go our own way, to follow our own, fairly flawed instincts, means that we lose out on all this joy because we feel we have to bear the full responsibility for everything. And we have nowhere to turn but our own limited worldview. How about we give Isaiah's

words a try and “*be strong and do not fear*” ? God is there for us, as he was for his people in the time of Isaiah.

Some of you might protest, though, that this is really unrealistic – it is just that kind of pie-in-the-sky stuff that we mentioned earlier. Yes, it does say that God will come to save – but it also says that God will come with vengeance. I’ve been a bit selective with the words of this passage this morning (always a temptation for preachers, especially if you weren’t really listening to the reading just now). There’s an awful lot of stuff in this chapter that can paint a very different picture. As well as the vindication of God’s people, there is vengeance. As well as restoration there is retribution. As well as faith there is fear. As well as justice, there will be judgement.

Well, if you know anything at all about the Bible, you’ll know that it is very realistic. This amazing vision of the kingdom of God is wonderful – and I believe it will one day become a reality. But when you look at the state of the world at the moment, that reality can’t happen without some other pretty drastic things happening as well. God’s purposes for his world will be consummated in this kingdom of peace and joy, in this world of beauty and abundance. But there’s an awful lot that has to be cleared away before that can happen. If all this good stuff is to come to pass, then evil has to be dealt with. This is how another writer puts it: “*Biblical realism requires that peace be the result of righteousness, and righteousness demands the punishment of sin. Only when God has judged the enemies of his people can his salvation in all its fullness be theirs* (Grogan ExpBC).”

That’s basically what Jesus came to do. When Isaiah says that “*your God will come ... to save you*”, he means exactly that. God will come into this fractured and fragmented world and show you a way out. Jesus, God with us, came physically into our world at Christmas and through his life, death and resurrection succeeded in defeating evil. Of course, the final consummation of that is still in the future, but we can live our lives now believing that the vision of the Kingdom conveyed by Isaiah will one day be a reality. Of course, we still have to deal with the day to day difficulties that this life throws up, but we have faith that ultimately we will be able to enjoy all the benefits of God’s love.

But then, you see, that confronts us with a choice. As this passage has shown us this morning, there is vindication and vengeance, justice and judgement, restoration and retribution. There is the gloomy prospect of defeat and despair, and the wonderful vision of joy and peace. What are we going to do about it? Do we take God at his word and follow him? Or do we ignore him, reject him and explain him away? Part of this vision that Isaiah discloses is of a highway “*the Way of Holiness*”. It’s a pretty common image in the teaching of the Bible and Jesus uses it several times. In fact, before the early church was called a church and before the followers of Jesus had been given the nickname “Christians”, the followers

of Jesus were known as “The Way”. Isaiah uses the kind of language that may well leave us feeling a bit uncomfortable today to describe those who choose not to tread that way – “*unclean ... wicked fools*” – but the benefits for those who do choose to follow the path towards God are security and protection, with the added extras of everlasting joy and gladness.

You see, those who take seriously what God says, who decide (and it has to be a conscious decision) to follow the way that Jesus sets out, those who dare to believe that there is something worth having beyond the gloom and frustration and hopelessness and struggle of this life – those people can face the future with the knowledge that ultimately God has got it sorted out and that he will help us to cope with the here and now of this life until we are able to experience that. When we met for our staff team meeting this week, we were reminded of the words in Peters’ *First Letter* in which he says to the beleaguered Christians of the first century AD (just as Isaiah spoke to the beleaguered people of God in the seventh century BC), “*Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you*”.

We can turn to God and ask for his help. We can offload our anxiety on to him. As we are so often saying, that doesn’t necessarily mean the problems go away – the bills are still there, the doctor’s appointments still have to be kept, the jobs market doesn’t suddenly shift in your favour – but it does mean that we can know God’s presence and his strength in those situations. And we know that eventually we will be able to enjoy the fruits of his kingdom which Isaiah and Jesus give us such wonderful glimpses of. As with the people of Judah in 681BC, as with the Christians of the Mediterranean in 65 AD, so with the hard-pressed people of Lichfield and in Britain in 2012 AD, the choice is yours. Are you going to dismiss it all as the usual religious ramblings and risk that God will come “*with vengeance and divine retribution*”? Or will you grab hold of that promise that “*your God will come to save you*” and therefore go into 2012 – and whatever it may hold for you – with Isaiah’s words as your support: “*Be strong, do not fear*” ?