

“THE GOD WHO COMES”

Isaiah 40:1-11

Today is Advent Sunday (as we've already mentioned). It's traditionally when we start looking forward to Christmas, although for many people that is now a date sometime in late September, it seems. In the life of the Church over the centuries, it's been the beginning of the time in which Christians start to prepare themselves spiritually for the celebration of Jesus Christ's arrival on earth, a time of waiting and expectation. The purpose of Advent calendars was originally to help with that, to remind people day by day during December that Jesus was coming.

Although for the majority of people now Advent is not necessarily a time of spiritual preparation, it is still very much a time of waiting, of looking forward. And that is something God's people have been doing for centuries, for millennia. Hundreds of years before Jesus actually arrived, the people were looking forward to the coming of their Messiah – the Hebrew word which corresponds to the Greek word Christ, the Anointed One. Through the prophets and poets and preachers of that era, God was encouraging his people to be expectant, to look forward in hope to the day when the Anointed One would arrive and set things to rights. Clearly, then, as now, all was not right in the world and those who trusted God trusted him that he was going to sort out the mess and vindicate their faith in him.

One of those prophets pointing people towards the coming of the Christ was Isaiah, and we've just read some of his words in our Bible reading. They are words that were spoken to a people who were really struggling with their situation. The people who first heard or read those words were actually in exile. They'd been deported to Babylon after a disastrous defeat by the superpower of the day and were languishing far from home, far from the centre of their national life, far from the places where they worshipped their God. They couldn't really see what the future held and they couldn't really understand why they were having to go through all this. But God has a message of hope for them. The passage begins, *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God”*. It talks of tender words and offers hopeful message. Despite what seems to be happening, God is still at work, still looking out for those who trust him and still getting ready to vindicate that trust.

And the message is that God is coming. He is coming to make a difference in his world, coming to offer hope for the short term and for the eternal future. With hindsight we can see that these words were ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, but in the shorter term they did speak to these people of a return from exile and a restoration of their land. As far as we are concerned, centuries after the immediate resolution of the crisis, we see here something of the God whom we worship and something of the way in which the arrival, the Advent of Jesus can make a difference to us.

You see, as we've said, these are words of comfort and confidence, words we can take seriously and attach real significance to. The beginning of Advent is a good time to reflect on them once again and to remind ourselves of what it is we actually believe about Christmas. Christmas is a regular reminder of the God who comes into our situation and makes a difference. Because, as we look around at our world, as we struggle with what's going on in our own lives, things are not as we'd like them to be. Nationally and internationally there is turmoil – wars, conflicts, uncertainty, oppression, injustice, suffering. And in our own personal situations we are trying to cope with health issues, relationship issues, lack of fulfilment, dissatisfaction, distress. That's the human condition: it's always been like that as people have grappled with the great problems of life.

That's not the way God wanted it to be and he wants to set things right. He wants his much-loved creatures to enjoy the life he's given them, to get the best out of the world in which he's put us. Evil has messed up his good creation, but he is determined to restore things to how they originally were. And to do that he has to get involved in it himself. That's why Jesus came – God coming into his own world to make a real difference, to transform things.

God tells his prophet Isaiah to comfort his people, to tell the people to prepare themselves for his arrival in this world. His glory is going to be revealed (v5) in a way that no-one will be able to deny. But the question is, how is the prophet to communicate this? What is he to say (v6)?

Well the first thing to recognise, says God, is that this present life is pretty transient. Human beings come and go. Our time on earth is limited. We can never really sort out the mess we're in because of the transitory nature of human life. You've only got to look back over a couple of centuries of history to see that what one generation thinks it has achieved is soon superseded by the next. As soon as the great reforming leaders are gone, life returns to its usual patterns. We get rid of one dictator and another springs up. We recover from one economic crisis and here's another one along very soon. But threading through all of that, if only we are prepared to stop and listen, is "*the word of God*" which "*stands for ever*". God has promised to put things right and he will keep that promise. Part of the problem is that no-one believes him anymore, so we try and sort it out ourselves.

The message the prophet is given to proclaim consists of just four words, but they are four of the most significant words in human history. God says to Isaiah, "Go and lift up your voice with a shout and tell them this – Here is your God!" God is coming into the world to do something, and he has done that in the person of Jesus. Christmas marks the point at which that happened. It may not have happened on December 25th. The images we've created of snowy scenes and talking animals and cosy cradles and all the rest may be an over-sentimentalising of the whole story, but it doesn't detract from the fact that God

did arrive in the person of a baby, the baby Jesus, who grew to be a man and who lived and taught and healed and preached and debated and died and lived again and is now glorified in heaven. That baby, that man was God, here among us, frail and fragile and vulnerable and part of God's plan to set things right again. Jesus came to make a difference – a difference eternally in restoring creation, and a difference personally to you in giving you back joy and meaning and fulfilment in life.

And the great paradox of God – the awesome, majestic Creator of the universe spilling noisily and messily out from between the thighs of a young Hebrew girl into a mess of straw and muck – is reflected in how he works in our world, in our lives. You see, the prophet is announcing that “*The Sovereign LORD comes with power and his arm rules for him*”. This is an immensely powerful God – the God who created this vast universe, who holds it in place and ensures that it all works as it should, who controls the exploding nebulae and spinning planets, who watches over this world and watches over his people. This is the God who, in the person of Jesus, took on the powers of evil at the cross and broke the power that sin had over the lives of men and women; who a couple of days later burst out of the tomb to show that the power of death was also defeated; who restored to men and women the choice that they originally had, to follow what God said or to plough their own selfish furrow.

And yet, that awesome, indescribable, unimaginably powerful God also behaves towards his creatures like a tender shepherd (*v11*). We don't end up as collateral damage in his battle with the powers of evil. He “*carries us close to his heart; he gently leads us*”. Having lived as a human being, God knows what it's like. Having had to cope with all that life can throw at him, just as we do – hunger, fatigue, anger, sadness, joy, uncertainty, pain, laughter, death – he knows what we're going through and can reach out to bring his help and his comfort. The problem is, so many of us either just don't realise what a tender helper he can be, or choose to reject it or ignore it, or refuse to believe it at all.

But, he says through the prophet, as we prepare once again to celebrate Christmas, “*Here is your God!*” This is what all this stuff about the baby Jesus means. This is God coming into our world, the God who makes a difference, the God who is powerful enough to deal with the greatest crisis, the God who is tender enough to comfort the neediest person. And the invitation this Christmas – as every Christmas – is to reach out and allow him to take you in his arms and help you. “*Here is your God!*” Welcome him.

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In bringing God's words to a people who were in exile and struggling with the situation of being far from their homes and their national life, Isaiah describes some aspects of God which can bring him closer to us.

1. POWERFUL (vv10ff)

When God does approach his people, when he does reach out to connect with us, Isaiah tells us that *"he comes with power, and his arm rules for him"*. And as we read on through vv12ff we have a poetic expression of that power being demonstrated in creation and his sustaining of it. This God is a powerful God. He is the *"Sovereign LORD"*. This is a God who comes to his people with the power to save them, the power to punish them, the power to protect them, the power to humble them. This is a God in whom we can trust, in whom we must trust, for there is no other god, no other power that can possibly stand against him.

2. PASTORAL (v11)

Now that can seem as if we are simply trusting in a tyrant who has bullied us into submission. Isaiah is at pains to point out that God does not behave like that. Look at v11. Here we have a picture that seems very different, but once again it is a picture that perfectly complements everything else that the prophet has said about him – a shepherd who tenderly watches over the vulnerable sheep in his flock. He cuddles them to his chest. He leads them gently and carefully along the paths which they have yet to discover, but which he is sure of. He is a God of awesome power, and a God who can gently and carefully pick us up and surround us with his arms of grace. He will protect us in the difficult times by keeping us close to himself, but also give us freedom to roam as he watches over us in the good times. In him we really do have everything we need.

3. PERMANENT (vv8,28)

Our experience of other humans could also mean that we have a kind of background fear that God will let us down. But Isaiah says here that he is *"everlasting"* in v28. He's always going to be there for you, always true to that image of the perfect, powerful shepherd. And in v8 he says that, despite the transitory nature of humanity, God will always stick to his word. If he has said he loves us, he always will. If he has promised to help us, that promise will always stand. We can't always see or appreciate quite what he's doing, but if we trust him, in the end it will all work out for good (look at *Romans 8:28ff*).

Questions for discussion

1. Is a picture of a God of infinite power an attractive one or not? Why/why not?
2. There are many images of God in the Bible – not only the Shepherd. List some of them. Which one is your favourite and why?
3. How can we avoid projecting on to God our experience of human beings who may have let us down?
4. We seem to be talking about a blind faith in God which might seem very irrational. Is that the case? What can help us in that?
5. The Bible is full of God's promises. Do you have a favourite? Why that one?
6. Look again at *Isaiah 40*. What else can you discover about God in it?