

“HERE IS YOUR GOD – 1”

Isaiah 40:1-11

Today is Advent Sunday, the time when traditionally 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, not least, the effects of the pandemic. 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 there'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. We're going to reflect further on that as we look at this passage over the next couple of weeks. 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.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) How do you observe Advent? Is there anything particular you do to prepare yourself to celebrate the birth of Jesus?
- 2) The words of this passage can be interpreted to refer to a return from exile for the people of Israel, the coming of Jesus as a human being and the coming of Jesus at the end of time. How do we decide which we accept – or do we accept them all? What difference does it make?
- 3) “Human life is pretty transient.” How does that make you feel? How does it affect the way you live your life?
- 4) What we believe as Christians is full of paradoxes. How do we resolve them?
- 5) What will you do this week in response to this passage?