## 6th December 2020

## Isaiah 40.1-11; Mark 1.1-8

People have been putting up there Christmas decorations early this year.1. They have got a bit more time of their hands because there is nothing else happening. 2. They want to cheer themselves up with some Christmas lights.

Some houses are already decked out with a full on light display. You worry that we may have to build more power stations and certainly won’t be reducing our carbon footprint by 68% in ten years’ time , as the government set out its target this week!

All Christmas lights have their origin in the Christian belief that Jesus said he was the light of the world – the light that shines in the darkness.

There is a story about a school nativity play. Sadly, most school nativity plays have gone online this year and are not happening face to face. So this is a story from the old days. In this school nativity play there was a young boy who had only one line. He had to stand and say ‘I am the light of the world’. However, on the day of the production, he froze at the sight of so many people and forgot his line. His mother was seated in the front row and began mouthing his line for him. ‘I am the light of the world’ she mouthed to him. Following her cue, he triumphantly said ‘My mother is the light of the world.’

Mothers, most of the time, are the light of their children’s world. Dad’s have also been called on to play their part in these times when parents have been working from home. It has of course presented its challenges and even stresses in some families: new changes to negotiate, hopefully without resentments. But sadly sometimes things don’t always work out. Life doesn’t always go according to plan.

For some people this Christmas may not be going according to plan. It may be a time they are dreading.

I was looking at old poems from Carol Services past and I came across this one by Verna S Teeuwissen which you can put a Coronavirus spin on.

## We won't have a Christmas this year, you sayFor now the children have all gone away;And the house is so lonely, so quiet and so bareWe couldn't have a Christmas that they didn't share. We won't have a Christmas this year, you sigh,For Christmas means things that money must buy.Misfortunes and illness have robbed us we fearOf the things that we'd need to make Christmas this year. We won't have a Christmas this year you weep,For a loved one is gone, and our grief is too deep;It will be a long time before our hearts heal,And the spirit of Christmas again we can feel. But if you lose Christmas when troubles befall,You never have really had Christmas at all.For once you have had it, it cannot departWhen you learn that true Christmas is Christ in your heart.

Many people dread Christmas for a variety of reasons. There was a very frank and poignant article a few years ago in the URC’s Reform magazine by a minister, David Owen who shared about the loss of his wife. He said ‘my wife Margaret was rushed into hospital on Christmas Eve, seriously ill. Everything we’d prepared for the festive day was put on hold. It was a Christmas I’ll never forget. After a long stay and six weeks, nursing at home, Margaret died the following March. By the next Christmas I’d come through my most terrible time of grief, but only just (I still grieve after nearly five years). My children, grandchildren and I knew that the first Christmas without her would be strange and sad, for we loved her dearly.

Margaret excelled at Christmas decorating. her colourful displays lit up the house, and her cooking skills were fit for royalty. But, more than all she radiated joy. How could we really celebrate with her missing? It was hard on the day, and our tears surfaced, but as we dined and shared the day together, recalling happy times past, we knew she was willing us to carry on cheerfully, and that we managed, as much as a tribute to her as for our own need. Family life prevailed, and with each other’s help we felt stronger for having come through this first and most emotive occasion.

David Owen goes on to say that of course, Christmas is a truly happy time for those of us who believe the birth of Jesus was God’s own coming among us. Our carols tell of ‘news of great joy, great mirth’, bidding us not be sad ‘since our redeemer made us glad’. This is an eternal happiness no human sorrow ever eliminates.

But David Owen also notes how whilst there was gladness at that first Christmas there was also much sadness, deeply embedded in the politics and religion of the time and people’s fears were palpable. The magi were in great danger, Herod ordered the massacre of the innocents, and Israel was under occupation from a ruthless Roman Empire. Sadness and gladness co-existed. Light needs darkness to shine in.

Our biblical passages speaks a message of hope in the midst of despair and darkness.

*Isaiah 40.vs 1: ‘Comfort my people; bring comfort to them says your God; speak kindly to Jerusalem.’’*

When God’s people are in distress, messengers of hope come to remind them of God’s steadfast love. Isaiah speaks a message of comfort to God’s people in exile: God will bring them back to the land of promise.

The book of Isaiah contains at least three sections, each speaking in and out of a particular era in Israel’s History. The first 39 chapters, dating from the 8th century BCE, are a series of warnings of coming disaster for the people of Judah. Chapter 40 begins the section of God’s word to the Judahites after their kingdom fell in 586 BCE. At that time many people were carried into exile in Babylon, perhaps even the prophet who delivers this message. After years in Babylon, many Hebrew exiles had built homes and established comfortable lives there.

But empires rise and fall and Cyrus of Persia came to threaten Babylon. Cyrus was thought to be more tolerant of the Hebrew exiles. There was hope for a new beginning. In **Isaiah 40:1–11**, the prophet speaks to persuade the exiles to go back to Jerusalem. Cyrus will be God’s instrument in fostering their return. Indeed, Cyrus eventually did provide for rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple.

In this passage, God sits in the midst of the divine council and speaks a message of comfort to the people of Judah and to Jerusalem. Their suffering is coming to an end; they have paid double the penalty for their sins – their defiant acts against God’s ways. The exiles hope there will be a way for them to return to the Land of promise. The prophet calls on the leaders of the people to prepare this “way of the Lord,” to make possible the return of God’s people.

God is creating a new geography, raising valleys and lowering mountains, smoothing the path that leads the exiles back to Jerusalem – back to the heart and centre of their faith. God’s people can confidently proclaim that God is faithful. Even though humankind is transitory, like grass in a field, God endures. The word of God stands forever.

Verses 9-11 answer the question: Where is God? God is here, Isaiah reminds the people. God the shepherd is coming with strength and with tenderness. God’s glory will once more be seen among the people. And, after this time of exile, God’s glory and presence will not be revealed to only Israel and Judah. “All people shall see it together” (verse 5).

It’s a message of comfort and hope to those in exile, those going through dark and difficult times. The hope is that God is using this time to reshape the geography and make a new way forward. Trust and hope.

The reading from Mark’s gospel starts by announcing good news. It is always interesting how books start:

Here’s a number of memorable first lines from books or films. I wonder if you can guess where they come from.

‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…’ (*A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens)

‘A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...’ (*Star Wars IV: A New Hope*)

‘Mr and Mrs Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.’ (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* by JK Rowling)

‘All children, except one, grow up.’ (*Peter Pan* by JM Barrie)

‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ...’ (Mark’s Gospel). These are the opening words of what is reckoned to be the earliest account of the life and death of Jesus – and they make quite a claim. The gospel is good news. A lot of people today dismiss our faith as akin to a fairy story, just a good story. They dismiss it unthinkingly without looking at the historical evidence and the personal experience of Christians. The gospel is not just a good story: it is good news – never mind putting up your Christmas lights just to cheer you up. If God came to us as Christ, loved us, suffered for us, died and rose again, then that is life changing good news. The least you can do is check it out for yourself!

Despite starting his Gospel with ‘The beginning of the good news\* of Jesus Christ…’, Mark does not begin at the beginning.

No mention of Jesus’ conception or birth (as in Matthew and Luke), nor even the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Rather, he begins with the ‘preparatory work’ done by John the Baptist in the wilderness.

There are many examples of preparatory work needing to be done before things can really begin – e.g. preparing ground for planting; demolition or stripping out before building or renovation; shopping before preparing a meal/party or preparing for Christmas.

Are we happy to do the work of preparing the way for others, or do we always want to be the ‘main act’?

The Greek word *odos* [[1]](#endnote-1) in verse 2 and 3 is variously translated as ‘road’ or ‘way’ or ‘journey’. The word*odos* appears in both halves of the quotation precisely as an indication that it is the key to understanding the Gospel of Mark. The word will reappear at significant moments, especially in the middle core chapters of the Gospel
e.g. Jesus… *on the way* asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ (8.27); They were *on the road*, going up to Jerusalem (10.32); Bartimaeus…followed him *on the way*(10.52). ‘Way’ is a fundamental image for this Gospel. It was of course an early title for the followers of Jesus (Acts 9.1). I suspect that, initially, it was linked to the ‘way Jesus taught’. And I think that it may have been due to the genius of the writer of Mark’s Gospel that ‘the way Jesus taught’ shifted into exploring ‘the way Jesus walked’.

This ‘way’, both for John and for Jesus, begins in the wilderness (1.4,12). The wilderness is above all a place of ‘stripping’. Stripping us down from excess, from pretensions, stripping us naked of the subterfuges we so often use to hide from God and from ourselves. Neville Ward in his classic book *The Use of Praying* wrote the telling words ‘Mankind cannot bear very much reality’. The wilderness is a place where we may be asked to bear more reality than we feel comfortable with.

Sometimes the wilderness we encounter is an actual physical place. I can well remember trekking in the Judaean wilderness near Jerusalem. It was an awesome experience, not simply because of the beauty of the surrounds. A large measure of its significance came from the awareness that (quite literally) a few water bottles, a map, (and hopefully my sense of direction!) might well stand between life and death. Life itself was thus given a new importance and clarity.

More often perhaps we have metaphorical ‘wildernesses’ that we are all called to spend time in at different points of our lives. They are periods of time when circumstances leave us bare so that we have to wrestle with ourselves – and perhaps also with God. Our only companion may seem to be our shadow – whose acquaintance we would often prefer not to make.

There is a sense in which our experience as nations, as communities, as churches and as individuals since March this year has felt to many of us like ‘a wilderness’. We have in many ways been metaphorically ‘stripped’ and deprived of distractions and thus forced to bear far more reality than is normally the case. Churches too, because of the restrictions they are required to follow, have also needed to ask themselves questions about what is essential – and what is not.

In the old joke, the question is, ‘How do I get from here to X?’ – and the answer given is, ‘If I were you, I wouldn’t start from here.’ But ‘here’ is the only place we can start from. Can there be anyone who does not engage in ‘if only’ thinking – regretting decisions they have made, or those made by others? Repentance (as implied by the Greek word *metanoia*)

is not only about changing direction, it is also about changing our mind and our mode of thinking, and focusing on the way ahead (‘If only we can…’) rather than what lies in the past (‘If only we had/hadn’t…’).

The Isaiah passage reflects the practice of rulers sending heralds ahead to make sure that everything is prepared for their royal progress – just as heads of state today send ‘advance teams’. In Russia there is a story about Grigory Potemkin who, going ahead of the Empress Catherine the Great on her journey to Crimea in 1787, erected fake portable villages to deceive her into thinking things were more prosperous than they really were.

The term ‘Potemkin village’ is sometimes still used in politics and economics for a deception aimed at making things seem better than they are. And, in Eastern Europe, to ‘potemkin’ means tidying things away (e.g. in cupboards) ahead of the arrival of visitors.

Do we ever ‘potemkin’ in our lives, rather than truly repent and prepare the way for the Lord?

May God help us to turn towards the way of the Lord.

When we are despairing, when we feel far from our true centre, we need the message of hope contained in today’s readings. God is faithful. God will restore and guide. Isaiah, Cyrus, and John all were God’s messengers of this hopeful word.

Look at your Christmas lights – shining in the cold darkness. Whilst the grass withers and the flowers fade – put your trust in the word of God which endures forever, put your trust in the word of God made flesh and come amongst us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian and part of the Confessing Church that opposed Hitler’s Nazi Party and paid with his life. Bonhoeffer said ‘we are no longer alone. God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved into us. Therefore we adults can rejoice deeply within our hearts under the Christmas tree, perhaps more than the children are able. We know that God’s goodness will once again draw near.

As David Owen concludes his article, even at such a happy time as Christmas, some of us will shed tears. But we can be sure that the child of Bethlehem, the Christ of the cross knows why, and holds us in his eternal love.

Comfort my people, bring comfort to them.

Let us pray

God of passion and power,
insistent, immediate,
challenging, compelling us with your story’s breathless beginning:
walk us into the wilderness
to hear your voice where silence reigns.
Give us insight, the vision beyond all seeing,
so we may look upon heavens torn open
and know that the time of good news for all creation
Is always now. **Amen**

We thank you, God, for the wilderness.
Wilderness is our place.
As we wait for the land of promise,
teach us the ways of new living,
lead us to where we hear your word most clearly,
renew us and clear out the wastelands of our lives,
prepare us for life in the awareness of Christ’s coming
where the desert will sing
and the wilderness will blossom as the rose. Amen.

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We pray…
For those lost in valleys.
**May they be lifted up.**
For those stuck in the heights.
**May they be helped down**.
For those in barren places.
**May they find shelter.**
For those in rough places.
**May they hear eternal words.**
For those seeking forgiveness.
**May they find it.**
For those seeking apology.
**May they hear it.**
For those waiting for a long time.
**May they find patience in your patience.**
For those waiting for renewal.
**May there be springs of growth.**
**Amen.**

**Opening prayer**

Comfort us, O God,

with a comfort that strengthens us for the

world.

Comfort us, O God,

with a comfort that encourages us to trust you.

Comfort us, O God,

with a comfort that inspires us to be messengers of hope

1. Clare Amos <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/110-november-december-2020-ab/advent-2/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)