

“Comfort, comfort ye my people”

A sermon preached by The Ven Jonathan Chaffey, Archdeacon of Oxford on the 2nd Sunday in Advent 2020 in St Peter’s Wolvercote. Refs: Isaiah 40.1-11; 2 Peter 3.8-15; Mark 1.1-8

“Comfort, Comfort ye my people”. ‘Comfort’: what do you understand by the word? It derives from the Latin ‘*con fortis*’, meaning ‘*to strengthen together*’. In the Bayeux Tapestry there is apparently a depiction of a soldier pointing his spear at the rear of another, with the inscription: ‘*King William comforteth his troops*’ – in other words, a corporate strengthening of the backbone. At a church service on Advent Sunday where I was due to preach there was a congregational note before the readings: ‘*Sit comfortably to listen to God speaking through the scriptures*’. Whilst understanding its intent for people to listen to the Scriptures with relaxed attention I wondered whether it was misleading – because scripture is unnerving in its ability to disturb shallow thinking and to challenge its readers to step beyond their comfort zone. The voices of the Old Testament prophets or John the Baptist are hardly those found on children’s TV. I recall Terry Waite sharing how he was handed a bible during his years of imprisonment by Hezbollah in the Lebanon as an emissary of the Archbishop of Canterbury. As he read it through several times and prayed, he found it disturbing, as he was confronted with the truth about the human condition and comforted in his relationship with God.

“Comfort, comfort ye my people”, says your God. What does this really mean? The Hebrew word, ‘*Naham*’, suggests both relief from distress yet also invigoration, the restoration of courage. This interpretation is captured movingly in Handel’s Oratorio, Messiah, in a style that speaks of both consolation and authority. Both are there in this text and both are needed today.

So let’s look at this ancient understanding of comfort and what it might teach us today. The backdrop to Isaiah’s writing was that of exile, the people of Israel banished from their homeland about 600 years BC. Just as the physical land lay desolate and as the heart of their faith – the Temple – lay fallen, so the national soul was barren. The people had failed to love mercy, act justly and to walk humbly with God. So the exile became a necessary means of rediscovering their spiritual identity. They were now longing for God’s help: to rebuild the Temple; to rediscover the Torah (God’s law); and to live out their identity as God’s holy people.

We have known ourselves a sense of exile this year within our own communities and among the families of the nations. There has been too much loss, notably in physical bereavement but also through economic hardship and social isolation. The pandemic has been especially difficult, of course, for those most vulnerable, whether in our own country or overseas – for those whose access to health, education, security and livelihoods was already limited. On top of this as a church community we have been unable for long periods to worship together physically.

As for the ancient Israelites, these circumstances bring deep questions to the surface. What is most important for us? What do we stand for? These are questions that you may have faced individually and within your families. It also relates to the questions already there for the church community of Wolvercote and Wytham in the midst of a vacancy: how can we best fulfil our call to be, in the words of the Diocesan Vision, a ‘*Christ-like people for the sake of God’s world*’? Looking more widely, we are facing tough choices at a national level, hence the significance attached to the debate on the foreign aid budget. Where does charity begin and end? Bishop Steven has written to diocesan MPs on this issue, quoting an estimate from the World Bank, that up to 150 million people now risk falling into extreme poverty through the effects of the Pandemic.

Into the situation faced by the Israelites, and into our own, God speaks words of comfort. He does so with tender authority. Sin can be redeemed, lives rebuilt, a highway be created even in the desert. It is a message of hope that takes sin seriously but encourages us to pray without inhibition; it acknowledges that human glory is like grass that withers whereas the Word of God stands for ever; it recognises God to be sovereign in his power yet also a shepherd who gently carries his lambs. This message is, of course, embodied in the person of Jesus, who came among us, remains among us and will come again in glory.

Advent is a good season for receiving comfort. At the beginning of the Church’s liturgical year it is right to start as we mean to go on. In practice it means being honest about ourselves, allowing our false images about ourselves and about God to be stripped away. It gives us permission to throw everything at

him, for he can take it. It also challenges us to consider how we worship him, whether together on Sundays or in our lives midweek. As a church community, are we looking for God's highway in the desert and will we step onto it? Are we up for what he might do among us or are we fearful of change? If it was not for God's comfort, that is both consoling and encouraging, the future could be a frightening prospect, especially for those going through difficult times. But with the promised comfort of God, all things remain possible, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. **Amen.**