



Sunday 6th December 2020 – The second in Advent.

A service for personal worship.

Preparing words: God you called and prepared your chosen ones through the words and actions of many others. Some were prophets, like Isaiah, offering the insights in to fearful situations and giving hope for a better future which was, as yet, unseen. Later came John, known as the Baptist, a strange character in a strange place and time, but with a message and personality that drew others to him. Today we gather, in a strange time and situation, to offer ourselves in worship. May our worship be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

At this point you may want to light a candle (or two) to mark the second Sunday in Advent.

Take time to relax in the presence of God. Close your eyes and let his Spirit enfold you, let Him lead you into worship.

Singing the Faith 181. (H & P 79) Of the Father's love begotten.

Prayers.

Gathering of oneself. In this place and time I bow my head before you my father God. I bring myself into the sanctuary of this time, apart from all that needs to be done or that I want to do. I remove myself from the business of my normal day and offer myself, wholeheartedly, to you my Lord and my Saviour. In preparation, for your word, I surrender my thoughts, my worries and my distractions. I come as your child, one blessed and sanctified by the blood of your son, Jesus who is the Christ. I make myself available to listen to the calling of your voice, as did the people of the past when they gathered around John and the Old Testament Prophets. I come because my trust is in you and your word. Amen.

I thank you Father God, creator of the seen and unseen; the strange and that which we accept as normal; of the desert places and the verdant pastures; the dark, night skies and the bright, daylight ones. I thank you for all that makes my worthwhile even in this different reality. I thank you for my family and friends, my home, my familiar and favourite things. I thank you for the many and varied ways that we can all keep in touch in this the 21st century. I thank you that you are still working in our world and calling to your people. I thank you that you never leave me and that I can reach out to you at any time. You are the voice that calls to me in

the desert places of my life. I thank for the Bible and its stories of triumph over adversity. For the hope that is found within its precious pages, especially that you kept your promise of a Saviour for the whole world. In this time of Advent I place myself with those who waited so long for the Messiah to come, but know that I am so privileged because I have met your Son. Thank Father that you did not withhold your most precious gift, from your people, but sent Him to be our joy and salvation. In you, Father, I am blessed, may I be a blessing to others. Amen.

In my desert places I find it easy to complain that I feel alone, and, yet, I have failed to reach out to you for comfort. Forgive me Father. I have wondered when my life will return to normal but haven't taken the opportunities to pray that this time apart from normality affords. Forgive me Father. I have look inwardly instead of raising my eyes to you. Forgive me Father. In this time of silence remind me, once again, of your promise of forgiveness. This is my joy. Thank you Father God. Amen.

The readings for today.

Isaiah chapter 40 verses 1 – 11.

Mark chapter 1 verses 1 - 8.

In last week's reading from Isaiah we heard the prophets shouting at God, asking Him to come down and shake the earth. Isaiah wanted a visible God who would destroy the enemies of his people. A violent, angry God but one who would bring an end to his people's suffering. In contrast this week's reading begins with that gentlest of words – comfort. Allow yourself some time to reflect upon this one word. Think about what comfort means to you right now. Do you envisage being wrapped in a physical blanket, warm and snug? Can you bring to mind the words of loved ones past present? Are you wrapping yourself in the arms of Jesus or kneeling at his feet? Comfort is only seven letters long but it can offer so much to so many. It was to the many that Isaiah was prophesying and they needed to know that their God would comfort them. In a time of exile, with their own homeland and traditions, a distant memory, they needed to be reminded that their God was still their God and that He still cared for them. So "Comfort my people" says our God. "Comfort them!" Note the exclamation mark – this is not a suggestion to Isaiah and the other prophets it is a command. Then comes the real comfort as God tells the people that His punishment, of them, is coming to an end because He has forgiven their sins. Amazing love, O what sacrifice! (Graham Kendrick –

My Lord what love is this). From comfort the psalmist turns to the nature of human love both for God and each other. Starting with a call to prepare a way for the Lord, a call to advent living. A call to expect the Lord. To get themselves ready to be in the presence of the Lord. This tells the people that, although God has forgiven their sins, they themselves have still got work to do. There are physical images of the difficulty of preparing the way of the Lord. Clearing ways through the desert. Sand and dust are like snow, you clear and they immediately come back! The hills are to be levelled. The rough country made smooth, one for the gardeners among this dispersed congregation. One could say that Isaiah knew that mankind could not make themselves worthy to be in the presence of God – well not without putting their trust fully in Him. Later still the true nature of humans is revealed. They are grass. Blown in whichever direction the wind wills. In exile some had abandoned the ways of the Patriarchs and adopted the ways of their captors. An easier way of being in a difficult time in their history. Blown by the wind. Suspect to the inevitable withering and death. Yet still more hope, more comfort comes in the imagery of the shepherd. Comfort my people, says the Lord Comfort them.

So to the Gospel. Here we find no preamble, no quiet stable, no angels or shepherds to ooh and ah at and take comfort from. No gentle Mary or faithful Joseph. None of the usual characters make a physical appearance, not even the main one, Jesus himself. Instead Mark starts his Gospel with words taken from Isaiah, Malachi and 1 Kings. Before that, however, Mark makes a prophetic and very powerful statement: - "This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This IS the Good News. Comfort my people, says the Lord, Comfort them. What greater comfort could there ever be than God with us, Emmanuel? None! How to make the people stand up and take note might have been the issue, after all the people of Israel and Judah were not really noted for their awareness of God and His message. Also they were going through turbulent times. Their country was occupied, their religious practices were tolerated only because the Romans knew they would be riots and insurrection if they did not allow the traditional Jewish practices to continue. There were suggestions of the desire to overthrow the puppet King Herod. All was not calm or bright, no silent night in that land. Turmoil, injustice, the threat of death, all of these were an ever present reality. In to such a desert came the rebel son of a member of the Sanhedrin. A voice calling for a nation to repent. Behind the voice was a man, a strange man, a wild man. One who drew people to his

strangeness. A man who could attract people just by appealing to their own curiosity. A freak show exhibit, maybe, but it worked. People flocked to John, some to admire, some to condemn. For whatever reason they came, the thing that matters is that they did come. Whilst John may have been strange his message wasn't. It was a pure, unadulterated call to make oneself ready to meet with God. To shed the old self and to come prepared for the new self that could be had only by meeting with the Christ. John's message was not to be ritually clean, that is outwardly clean, but to be inwardly cleansed. The only way was to repent of all sin and make a decision to allow God to transform you by the life and death of his son. John, the wanderer, the new Elijah, the wild man of the Bible was, also, the forerunner of the Christian faith. As Isaiah prophesied he prepared the way through the desert. All mankind just has to walk along it and meet with the Lord. Wherever our wilderness is we can always find our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ there, in the midst of it, with us. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession: Reflect upon your own wilderness and ask Jesus to meet you there. Reflect upon the wilderness that the church has travelled through this year and be thankful that Jesus has met us there. Reflect upon the effects of the Covid pandemic and ask God to keep on reaching out to the whole world. Reflect on the work of all who have persevered during the most testing of times and thank the Spirit for being alongside them. Reflect, in silence, on your own concerns for others and ask God to work with you as you pray. Give thanks that God hears all our prayers. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer.

Singing the Faith. 350. (H & P 238, MP 266) I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship.

Say the words of the Grace slowly and reverently.