

ADVENT 2

6TH DECEMBER 2020

Isaiah 40. 1-11

Psalm 85

Mark 1. 1-8

I wonder about those times when we have begun a new phase in life and in our beginning we have had to leave something behind. We are beginning anew today. We have been changed by the last months and it certainly won't be clear for some time what that change might involve; what it is we might have decided to leave behind. And what we might have sifted and recognised is essential to our lives and our sense of self and is being brought along with us.

What were those times in your lives when you began a new phase? Maybe starting school – certainly for the first time, leaving the cocoon of home to face the rough and tumble of school life. The transition from primary to secondary school. Then from secondary to tertiary study or to work. What was left behind? Or from being single to being married – leaving home, making a new household together. The transition to parenthood, especially motherhood and the existential change that that involves. At these times we all leave something behind in order to take up the new. In the crossing over into the new thing we are changed.

We are praying with Michael McGirr through Advent and the metaphor of the doorway is a very rich one as we move toward Christmas. In life doors are open to us and closed to us. Some we must open for ourselves, others are opened for us. Some are locked to us or others prevent us from opening them, even though we might want to open them. Some we are pushed or pulled through. Others are slammed firmly shut in our faces. Doorways are a metaphor of possibility for us. As we cross over the threshold of the doorway into something new it's good to be watchful and attentive to what new thing life may be offering us in the passing through – and by life I mean God. As Paula D'Arcy says – God comes to us disguised as our lives. As we move through a doorway into a new phase of life we move into the possibility of God coming to us in new ways.

So as we re-enter life here in Melbourne after this long COVID lockdown things will not go back to normal; we have gone through a doorway and we won't go back. This week I heard a few people say they found themselves doing too much already and that they would back off. Others said they were not ready to step out into the new. We will all find our own pace. In a variety of ways governments are expecting things to be able to go back to the way things were; I'm not sure everyone wants to come along. And by our action or inaction we will also change things. We have power here.

The prophecy from Isaiah begins with words which are so familiar to many of us: Comfort, O comfort my people. The voice crying in the wilderness alerts us that something new is to come; that out of being laid low there are surprising, unexpected possibilities approaching.

We have been laid low during these past months both in real terms – lying on the couch – and figuratively – all our power and ability to control and direct our lives has been laid low. As we re-enter our world we are invited to the kind of attentiveness which the prophet calls for: What shall I cry? I don't know what to say. I don't now how to be. We assume nothing anymore.

In Handel's *Messiah* Charles Jennens, the librettist for the oratorio, immortalised these words from the beginning of chapter 40 of Isaiah. Comfort, O comfort my people. At the beginning of the oratorio, the plaintive cry of the lone tenor, as though crying in the wilderness, alerts us to the hope of the Christ-story that unfolds in Handel's sublime work, telling the story of restoration of humanity in Christ. This is the story of the Good News; of something new beginning, of crossing over a threshold to something new. John the Baptist is the messenger of this news.

Some of you may have watched the performance of *Messiah* this week. There is a link in the Activities which were distributed with the Advent resources this week. *Messiah* is in its own way a kind of gospel, telling the story of Jesus by drawing on a range of Hebrew texts, most notably from the prophet Isaiah. Jennens follows in the pattern of the gospel writers and the way in which they drew from their own texts to "tell" the story of the Good News.

Mark, which we will read across this year, begins his gospel urgently: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. And away we go.

Two things to note about these few words from Mark. The first is that the words *the beginning of* are an echo of the words which begin the Book of Genesis. This is a new beginning, the story of a new creation in Christ. In him the world is being remade. Mark's first Jewish hearers would be alert to this echo in these few words and may have wondered: what sort of creation will this be.

The second thing to note is that Good News was a common expression in the Roman Empire. The gospel writers didn't invent it. Whenever the empire wanted to announce something significant, they would preface it with a kind of rider: Hear good news! The ascension of a new emperor, the conquering (and looting) of new territory, the subjugation of a new people. Good news? We know from the second Gulf War when the Alliance of the Willing proclaimed the *bringing of democracy* to Iraq that it was smoke-screen for invasion, subjugation, lies and the annihilation of more than 600,000 Iraqis. Democracy?

So, again Mark's hearers might have wondered, what kind of good news will this be? We know what the Roman good news looks like.

John the Baptist clears the way. He calls people to repentance; to turn toward God and away from their sin. This concern for repentance of John's is not with sin as personal peccadillos, but it is a collective call to repentance, rejecting the collective sin which creates systems of injustice and oppression. This renewal will come from the edge, not from the centre. This week in our Advent observance as we read the various stories of the birth of Jesus, we will hear from Luke. He tells us in much detail about the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist and his unexpected name. John's father Zechariah serves in the temple, utterly at the centre of Jewish life. But his son John will occupy the margin and it is from here that the call of God to renewal will come.

The peace that comes from the centre is so often a peace which involves control and oppression and the silencing and expulsion of some in order to "make" the peace. The call to God's peace always comes from the margins – the voice crying in the wilderness; the child-king born in the wrong place.

As we traverse Advent we are called to be attentive to glimmers of the life of God appearing in unlikely places; with us, around us. We might at first be inclined to reject them, have no room for them, find them a bit on the nose. But this is how the Christ comes to us; always comes. From the

edge, not the centre. So may God give us eyes to see and grace to receive the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

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