**6th December 2020**

**Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8**

With apologies to the female half of our congregation, I wonder how many of you gentlemen here this morning were in the Cubs, or the Scouts, or even the Venture Scouts (or Explorer Scouts as I understand they are called these days)?

Well, I hope you’ll all forgive me a small bit of reminiscing this morning. I spent much of my time as I grew up, in the Scouts and the Venture Scouts, and loved lots of what my friends and I did in those groups. The highlight of the year was always Summer Camp, always – or so it seemed - spent in one of Britain’s *wettest* locations in order that we might enjoy a week under canvas *just* that little bit more. Camp was generally great fun, but each morning, an hour after breakfast finished, we’d have to endure the dreaded part of every day – inspection. Anyway, our Scout leaders would come round after breakfast, and check that our patrol tents were reefed just as they should be; our sleeping bags were all rolled identically; our pots and pans were spotless; and our hands were marginally less grubby than usual. Woe betide any patrol which wasn’t up to scratch; who hadn’t done all they’d been instructed to do, in time for inspection. These were perhaps THE moments in the Scouts, when the Movement’s motto came most into play:

BE PREPARED!

Be prepared!

This is the instruction in this morning’s reading, of the Lord to the prophet Isaiah, for him to relay to the people of Israel:

A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare

the way for the Lord;

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.”

“Prepare the way for the Lord!”

Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel at the time of their exile in Babylon; a defeated nation, far from home, whose Temple – *the* place where they met with God - had been destroyed. Their situation seems devoid of hope. And yet God’s message to Israel, expressed in Isaiah’s prophecy (and perhaps familiar to many of us as the opening words of Handel’s Messiah) start with *tenderness*, and *healing*:

“Comfort, comfort my people,

says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her

that her hard service has been completed,

that her sin has been paid for…”

The message of Isaiah starts with *reassurance* that the Lord has not forgotten His people; that they are beloved; and that all that they have endured in defeat, exile and enslavement will come to an end.

A message to us too, after the awful year that we have all endured, of comfort to *us*. Even in the midst of this pandemic, God extends his comfort and hope to each one of us too.

As Isaiah goes on to say in verse 11, the people of God *then*, and we *today* are - like flocks tended by their divine shepherd - gathered into God’s bosom and held next to His loving and compassionate heart.

However, Isaiah then moves on from this wonderful reassurance. His message changes gear; there is more. Yes, Israel *is* beloved, and *will* be restored, but its people need to *respond* to Isaiah’s words. They need to respond because, as Isaiah alerts them, the Lord is coming!

The people of Israel in the time of Isaiah were waiting for their Messiah; for a liberator to free them from their exile in Babylon, to restore them to the Promised Land. But, although the Israelites *were* indeed allowed to go back home at the end of the sixth century BC, their return didn’t bring them the renewal that they had longed for. Over 500 years later, they *still* waited for the one who’d deliver them, only by then they sought freedom from the might of the occupying legions of the Roman Empire. They *still* waited for their saviour; their Messiah.

They expected this Messiah to look like a King. And in fact Isaiah’s words in many ways reinforce this, since what he tells them to do – how he tells them to *prepare* – is exactly what would normally happen in the Ancient World before the arrival of a king to a region. The inhabitants were to clear the road of stones, to fill in any potholes, in order to ease the passage of the ruler’s carriage; to “make straight” his highway.

But we know from the witness of the New Testament that the King who came to the people of Israel – and indeed to the whole of humanity – was *not* a king in *this* way. We know from the Gospels that the one who came to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah – Jesus the Messiah (Jesus Christ, as this translates into the Greek of the New Testament) was a king who came not in a splendid chariot drawn by beautiful horses, but very differently, as a tiny baby born in a stable to a young mother and older father, unmarried at that time; surrounded not by finery but by farm animals; attended on not by courtiers, but by shepherds.

God’s plan for the universe is not fulfilled in the form of a *conventional* king, but in Jesus, King of Kings, and also - as Isaiah tells us earlier - Prince of Peace.

But if this King, Jesus, looks so different from a conventional king, then how are *we* to prepare for *him*? As I’ve said over the last two weeks or so, this season of Advent leading up to the joy of Christmas is traditionally a time of waiting; a time of refection; a time of *preparation*.

With the coming of the king in the person of *Jesus*, Isaiah’s encouragement to his listeners to ‘prepare’ becomes metaphorical. There is no *literal* road in the wilderness to be made smoother. But, for the arrival of the King of Kings, *we still* need to prepare.

God’s Son has come once to this earth to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah and of others. In his time amongst humanity, Jesus made clear through his teachings that - after his crucifixion, resurrection and return to His Heavenly Father - he would return to earth once again to draw all things to him: the full realization of the Kingdom of God for which we pray, every time we say the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come”.

I don’t want to sound overly dramatic about this, if you’re a bit concerned that I’m going to preach all about the Last Days – after all, we’re in Whatton and not Wyoming! – but I *do* believe that it’s absolutely right for each one of us to consider what it means in our context, here, today, to *prepare* for the Messiah’s coming – *Jesus’s* coming - of which Isaiah speaks.

I believe there are 2 key areas we need to consider: preparing *ourselves*; & helping *others, also,* to be prepared.

First, preparing ourselves….

God’s message to us all in the person of Jesus is one, above all, of *love*. We read in chapter 8 of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans that, for all those who are in Jesus Christ, there is no condemnation, but that we have been set free from the law of sin and death. But this doesn’t mean that it’s ok to do whatever we please. Freedom *in* and *through* the person of Jesus Christ means that, in response to his infinite love for us, we *want* above all to be right with him; to confess and say sorry for all that we’ve done wrong; to prepare our hearts and minds and bodies for *His* sake.

This is of course what we do every time we come together as God’s family to share communion - as we will do very shortly - in our Prayers of Penitence: to *prepare* ourselves before Him. To be ready for Him to work in and through us, to bring His Kingdom into the lives of those whom we encounter day by day.

Which brings me to my second key area. As followers of Jesus, if we believe in His teachings, and in His power through the work of the Holy Spirit to transform lives, families, communities and societies, then we should be *passionate* about helping *others* prepare *them*selves before Jesus too.

To me, this preparation takes two forms. Firstly, it’s doing what we see Isaiah himself doing here in the *Old* Testament, and what we see the person of John the Baptist doing at the start of all four Gospels in the *New* Testament, including our reading this morning from Mark. It’s taking up what *Isaiah* declares, by straightening the path along which Jesus shortly followed. It’s what I can best describe as “being prophetic”.

I get a sense that, in this day & age, prophecy is often thought of as being some sort of futurology or even soothsaying. It’s *not*! Prophecy, rather, is being commissioned by God to be *His* *agent*, speaking as *His* intermediary to humanity, sometimes speaking into the future, but primarily with a message for the *present*; the time in which he or she - the prophet - is living.

If we - as Christians - are to prepare, for an encounter with Jesus, those whom we know, and our communities and our society as a whole, then *we* need to be prepared to be prophetic voices into these places. We must be prepared to *speak out* against the injustices and iniquities of *our own* society, and those in communities and countries in other parts of our world where we see these happening also. Against modern slavery and human trafficking; against poverty and homelessness; against the treatment of the voiceless and marginalized; against corporate greed and environmental destruction. Such prophetic witness is a central part of what it means to prepare Christ’s way amongst others.

And the second element of helping *others* prepare themselves before Jesus is to be that *very* *person* of Christ to them. To witness in *our* lives - in our words and in our actions - the love and compassion and grace of Jesus Christ, that they might see *Him* in us, and through the work of the Spirit in their hearts, in turn become passionate about preparing *themselves* for the coming of His Kingdom. Being disciples who, in Isaiah’s words, “go up on a high mountain”; who “lift your voice with a shout”; and who declare without fear, “Here is your God.” Being disciples *who make disciples*,

So, as we come together shortly to share together in the Lord’s Supper, the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he died, let’s take a moment to reflect on being prepared – preparing ourselves, and preparing others - for his coming.

As we approach Christmas, the Advent liturgy contains the following declaration:

“Our Lord says, “I am coming soon.”

May the Lord, when he comes,

find us *watching* and *waiting*.”

*My* prayer is that he will find us *prepared*, as well.