Advent 2  10 December 2023

Isaiah 40:6-11    Comfort my people

The passage from the prophet Isaiah is set about 200 years after the Jews had been carried off into exile by the Babylonians. Through Isaiah, God reminds the people that he does not forget his promises and he does not forsake his people. They are to be comforted because they have suffered enough and it is time for them to return to their own country. God will lead his people on a straight highway leading all the way back from Babylon to a new Jerusalem, just as he had lead them from slavery in Egypt to the promised land. God would send them a Messiah to be their king, who was not just mighty and powerful but at the same time, he would be as gentle and as caring as a shepherd who tends his flock. In time, the exiles did return to Jerusalem where the Temple was rebuilt and the Babylonian empire was crushed. Truly, God had not forgotten his people.

Now it is our turn to derive comfort and hope from this message. In some ways we live in similar times. We live in a deeply troubled world. Wars are being fought. Many are starving. In the west, we may be part of an affluent society but too often this hides an inner self that is spiritually impoverished and too often ignores the pleas of those in distress. We need to be renewed, brought to our senses and understand that there is more to life than self-satisfaction.

Isaiah’s message for us today is that just as God saved his people, and lead them back to Jerusalem with the promise of a saviour who would be their king, so he will save us too. In spite of our failures, we are still offered that message of comfort and joy. In our darkest moments, in our prison of despair, in the silent hours of the night, we need to remind ourselves that when we turn to Christ, he will breathe new life into us and the desert of our soul will become a like a lush pasture, refreshed with living waters. This is a time for grasping that message of comfort and of hope, for understanding what it really means and for passing that good news to others.

God has promised that his Son will come again to lead us into a new Jerusalem, which for us is God’s heavenly kingdom where all will be made new and where the glory of the Lord will be revealed. Time and again we are told to prepare for that day, when Jesus will return, not as a tiny baby but as a mighty king who will rule over all and who will care for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. It will be a heavenly kingdom that knows no end. And if we look, we can see glimpses of that Kingdom now.

We need to prepare spiritually for the light of Christ coming into the world. A couple of suggestions:
Begin each day with a short prayer: walking to the shops or somewhere quiet at home, just thank God for the new day, for your many blessings, for guidance and remember someone you know who needs your prayer. It can as simple as that. You might read a few verses from the bible, perhaps something from one of the gospels.

On Christmas Day we shall celebrate and rejoice at our saviour’s birth. And that will be wonderful. But it is merely a staging post. It may be the end of our Advent preparations, but it is just the beginning of another chapter. We will still be waiting for the time when our Lord will come to us again in majesty and in great glory.

Of course, we don’t know quite what lies around the corner and in the world things may get worse but our great hope, yes, our confident expectation is that our Lord will one day make all things new. So let us take comfort from the words of Isaiah and use this time of Advent to re-examine our faith, to re-evaluate our lives as followers of Christ so that we are prepared in heart and mind not just to welcome the Christ child on Christmas day but also to ready ourselves for the day when our Lord will return.