

Julie's sermon – Sunday 6th December – Isaiah 40: 1-11 & Mark 1: 1-8

Well as I've said today is the second Sunday in Advent and as we know Advent is all about being prepared for the coming of Jesus. This year more than ever, we need to feel and know the hope, joy and comfort that comes with Christmas – the hope that comes with Jesus. It has been a tough year; but there is hope – we hear that the vaccine we have all been waiting for is now ready and will be distributed over the next few weeks and months and that gives us hope that things will get better and we can all return to some sort of normality. But what will normal look like for lots of people who have lost loved ones because of the virus or who have lost their jobs, homes and wellbeing – normal will be very different for them. But they do still have hope and that is the one thing that no-one or no virus can take away – the hope that we have in Jesus. I don't mean that to sound trite or to minimise the situation we are in but the one constant through all this has been God and his unconditional love for us. But knowing that God is there and knowing that he loves us does not diminish the pain we feel when we have to live through tragic and painful experiences; but it does help us to come out the other side.

The readings throughout Advent are all about looking forward and waiting, they are about hope and finding comfort in God – not always easy but if we try; if we ask God to come and help us then we will see the hope that we've been given in the birth of that baby, born in a stable to humble but faithful parents. But the hope of what happened that night came long before and is evident throughout the Old Testament and we heard that in our first reading from Isaiah! Here is the promise of hope from God.

It begins with the words Comfort, comfort my people says your God!! It's a great word isn't it – comfort! What does it conjure up for you? Maybe it is food – perhaps like me you have a favourite food you turn to when you need to feel comforted! Things like chocolate or syrup sponge and custard or my favourite broth and dumplings!! Comfort foods are not a novel concept, of course. They tend to have a nostalgic factor or sentimental value to us, and are often characterized by a high calorie count, lots of carbs, or easy prep. When we need comfort we are not counting the calories!!

For children it may be comfort comes through objects – special blankets or stuffed animals. One of my granddaughters has lamby it is cross between a cuddly toy and a blanket and she has had it since birth. She's now 9 but lamby is there with her every night at bedtime – it brings her comfort.

Perhaps for you it is something you wear – maybe that old jumper or baggy trousers that you have had forever – they just make you feel better when you wear them. The list of what brings us comfort can get quite lengthy.

But I wonder what the people listening to Isaiah thought when they heard those words “Comfort, comfort my people”. God didn't mean for them to eat stodgy food or wear their favourite slippers. These words were meant to give them hope and bring restoration.

In order for us to understand just how important those words were we have to remember that the people of Israel have been living through some really tough times. They have turned away from God and have been threatened by the Assyrians and have now been taken into exile by the Babylonians. The people of Israel are in the throes of crisis, wondering if God was with them or had he deserted them because of their unfaithfulness.

And so they are feeling afraid and anxious about what the future holds and life is pretty dark right now but then they get this message of real hope from God.

Isaiah's words needed to be powerful and persuasive in order to generate the kind of hope and faith that could return them to a relationship with God and that would lead them back to Jerusalem. They needed to be words that would grab the attention of those listening. "Comfort, Comfort"; they weren't expecting that – they were expecting to be scolded for their actions; but here is God offering them warmth, security and unconditional love.

And he offers us the same. Those words of comfort are as relevant today as they were back then. They are words that people need to hear right now so that they can know that God is right there with them. These are tender words of promise that can calm and quiet the chaos in all of us. These words can wrap us in a heavenly hug and give us hope. Comfort, comfort!

For those of you following the Advent Bible study material you will know that the title is Light in the Darkness – and it is about finding comfort in these difficult times. We will be exploring where God has shown himself as light, how we can live in the knowledge of that light and where we can help others to see that light. You see living in darkness does not bring us comfort we need to step into the light and know and accept the love of God. Others need to know that too and we are challenged in the bible study to find ways to help others to see the light. Perhaps we need to help others to know that God is there waiting to comfort them too!! Maybe it is through something we say or do for them that will show them the comfort they are longing for! Never be afraid to show others the love of God because they need to know that help is at hand.

We have heard a lot about the cavalry being just over the horizon lately as Boris has tried to reassure us that a vaccine is on its way. And in many ways God is telling the people listening to Isaiah that the cavalry is on its way to save them but they just have to hang in for a while. Their while lasted about 700years, but it did happen and Jesus was born to save not only them but all humankind!! Thankfully we don't have to wait that long for the cavalry Boris is talking about because they are now coming over the hill – vaccine in hand!!

And it is reassuring to know that we have hope here and now but it is more reassuring to know that we have always had hope in Jesus.

Our gospel reading this morning quotes directly from the Isaiah passage as it describes John leading the way for Jesus. A voice crying out in the wilderness; preparing the way of the Lord. Just like Isaiah, John is bringing words of comfort to the people – he is telling them to repent and be ready because Jesus is coming.

So maybe we need to hear and accept those words of comfort for ourselves, because they are not just for other people but for each one of us too. God is there and he will comfort us if we open our hearts.

The people of Israel had no idea what Isaiah or John were really saying but they knew they had hope in God. We have the advantage of knowing what God was telling the people through Isaiah's words that Jesus was coming; and through John's words that Jesus had come; but we also know through the teaching of Jesus himself that he will come again!!

Advent is about waiting and being prepared!! Are we ready? Well that's up to us, isn't it!!

Amen