

**Readings:** *Isaiah 40:1 – 5, 9 – 11; Ps. 84 (85): 7 – 13; 2 Peter 3:8 – 14; Mark 1: 1 – 8.*

For those of us who rejoice in the English musical tradition it is impossible to hear the first words of today's first reading without hearing in the background the first aria of Handel's *Messiah*, with its thrilling call to comfort God's people with the news that their *time of service* is ended.

The words are those of an unnamed prophet, living in the sixth century BC, at the time of Israel's exile in the foreign land of Babylon. (*The words have been added to those of the eighth century prophet Isaiah, so the author is usually called Second Isaiah.*)

The message is addressed, not to the exiles, but to the city of Jerusalem, personified as a desolate widow. She is assured that *her sin* – the sin of rejecting the LORD – *is atoned for*, and that the punishment *received from the hand of the Lord* – the punishment of seeing her children exiled in Babylon – is ended.

The LORD himself is about to bring the exile to an end, and to make their return possible a *highway* is to be made across the desert which separates Jerusalem from Babylon. Then *the glory of the LORD shall be revealed*, for he is not simply sending the exiles home – he himself is bringing them home. And his action is described in two apparently contradictory ways: he is a victorious warrior – He is *coming with power, his arm subduing all things to him*, but, at the same time, *He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes.*

One of the repeated themes of Advent and its hymns is that – like the people of Israel – we are in exile. We are not fully at home here on earth, but *in a strange land* where we have to *sing the Lord's song*. And, as we do that, we think with longing of the heavenly city, *Jerusalem the mother of us all*, into whose welcoming embrace we and all other exiles will one day be gathered.

But in the meantime, there is a *straight highway* for our God to be made *across the desert*.

And that is the task John the Baptist calls us to – just as he called his contemporaries in the desert of Judea. Today's psalm speaks of the qualities for which we should be working to prepare that highway, for they are the ones that accompany the coming of the LORD – *justice shall march before him and peace shall follow his steps.*

(AD 2) SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

(DECEMBER 6<sup>TH</sup>, 2020)

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