

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-11 (and Mark 1:1-8)

We are in the second week of Advent, a season of waiting for Christ-with-us. In these days we embrace imagery of darkness and light as one way of thinking about how we wait for Christ. Already today we've lit an Advent candle; we've sung of Christ who 'brings a never-ending light'; we've been invited to bring ourselves before 'Christ the light of the world' in confession, trusting that he 'has come to dispel the darkness.' We look towards the coming of the Christ-child with sparkling love and grace, over-shone by a bright star. We look towards the light.

And this is good: this is what Advent is for – to search for the Christ-light to whom we always journey. Yet it is tempting to try and stay with the light, to bury ourselves in it – in the bright traditions of the season. I'd rather kneel at the crib of Christ who illuminates it all with glory and love, rather than stumble along the Magi's path guided by a distant star.

Yet – this sense of stumbling along a dimly lit path can often be something that we experience, or be aware of others experiencing. I'm sure we're all familiar with the feeling of being in the dark – of wondering when brighter days will dawn. Let's take up the Advent calling this morning, then, to acknowledge that darkness, and discern what comfort we might find within it and how we might respond to it.

In doing this, I don't want to downplay the brilliance and beauty that can be found. Yet I do want to offer us space to recognise that we are often confronted with situations, either personal or global, that are dark. Advent gives us the space to be honest about this even as we journey towards the light. Perhaps this sense of being in the dark is something close to home – that diagnosis, or lack of one. That friend who's at a loss over their vocation. That lack of food or steady income or shelter or love.

Perhaps it's something about how we locate ourselves in a hurting world – the heartbreak over everything that is happening to our fellow human beings around the planet. I cannot wrap my heart or my mind around what is happening in places of deep conflict and violence at the moment. There's darkness that, even from a distance, we're encountering.

I think this kind of experience is what our words from Isaiah speak to – both for Isaiah's first readers and hearers, and for Isaiah's readers and hearers today. I don't want to co-opt Isaiah's words and simply read our lives into them: they were written to a specific people, time and place, and they are read in many different contexts around our world today. But I think there's a point of connection between all of Isaiah's readers and hearers in that we all, in our common humanity, experience loss: we all encounter darkness and uncertainty. We all at times stumble along a dimly lit path looking for light.

Isaiah's first readers and hearers were a people who were walking that path in exile from their home – and the words we heard today are a turning point in Isaiah's message to them. These words turn our attention to themes of God's hope, hinted at in the first 39 chapters of the book which major on God's judgment. From chapter 40 the prophets' words turn our gaze towards an imagined, hoped-for future – towards the light. These are not words, however, that are spoken *in* that light: they are spoken to a people still in exile, still in the dark before the dawn – unsettled, tired, heartbroken people.

Into such uncertainty, Isaiah doesn't write a bright song of victory for the end of the journey but a song of promise for the way yet ahead. They are words written to a people still in the dark about how peace will come. **They are words for the journey:** words for fragile bodies and broken hearts; promises to accompany them as they keep seeking the dawn of God's grace.

They are words of comfort. They begin with God saying: 'Comfort, O comfort my people'. Now this is not the sense of comfort as in cosiness – the curtains drawn against the early evenings, and a night in with a book or a group of friends. This is not comfort as in relaxation, or being made 'comfy' – but comfort as in being strengthened or heartened. It is comfort as in being given help, being given what you need for whatever the journey brings and whatever you're facing. It is about being en-couraged for the way ahead (given courage): the kind of comfort needed to keep going even in the dark.

We see a similar meaning in Psalm 23, in which God is described as a shepherd who takes care of their sheep. The Psalm describes the shepherd's staff as being a 'comfort': the shepherd would have used their staff to poke and prod and guide the flock of sheep into place; to keep them going. It's not a comfy image – but it's a *comfortable* one. One that's about the presence of the shepherd with their sheep, giving them what's needed in order to keep them going.

So these words from Isaiah are words of comfort to hearten and bring courage to those still on the way, still in the dark – and they do so by announcing and describing God's power and presence with their people.

God is a God (these words say) who forgives, and announces that forgiveness is not on the basis of people's effort but on the basis of God's will – the people's sin has been paid for. God is a God whose presence is prepared for by the levelling of the playing field – mountains made low and valleys raised up, a highway made through tough desert terrain; a way perhaps for exiles to return home. This is a God who makes their people's homecoming possible.

God is a God whose creative word endures even as human effort fades and falls like wildflowers. This is a God who makes a way for their people not on the basis of the people's strength – but on the strength of God's word.

God is a God whose arm is stretched out as a symbol of that strength which protects the weak and challenges the proud. This is a God who is powerful in mercy and justice.

Yet God is also a God who tends their flock gently like a shepherd, gathering lambs in their arms and carrying them close to their heart, gently leading those that have young – intimately present and loving.

These are the comfortable words that Isaiah proclaims: words of the power of God who gathers their people not on the basis of the people's effort or strength, but on the basis of God's faithfulness, majesty, and gentleness. We could spend a whole sermon on each image of God Isaiah offers here – and I'd encourage you to choose one this week to pray through or sit with as you journey through Advent. Together these images offer a vision of God's presence which illumines the darkness of uncertainty, exile, waiting, heartbreak: even while walking along the dim path towards promised light, the God who will bring that light is right there with their people in the darkness, reassuringly faithful. The dark is not dark to God, as Psalm 139 says – the dark shines like the day, for the darkness is as light to you, God.

Accompanied by these words, when we find ourselves in the dark of Advent or of life in general, we can keep going with courage and confidence. Light will dawn: brighter days do come. Our Gospel reading shines with God's promises drawing ever nearer, as John declares the advent of Christ by proclaiming some of Isaiah's words anew. John uses Isaiah's old words to speak new hope into *his*

context. He proclaims the making of a straight path for the Lord – conjuring with that proclamation Isaiah’s vision of God, and in John’s context of Christ, as present in power, faithfulness, gentleness.

We can keep going with confidence that the light dawns – and that whilst we wait for that dawn to break God is with us. Christ is near to us on the journey, even as we follow the star to meet him.

As we keep going on that journey, we can speak those comfortable words to ourselves and to others, joining with the presence of God in illumining the darkness before the dawn.

We can hold out a steady light of hope in a God whose word endures, when confronted with the darkness of uncertainty or pain, in our or others’ lives. Lives can be made whole.

We can hold out a blazing light of compassion and peace when confronted with the darkness of conflict or war; or with the darkness of systemic injustice or brokenness. God’s kingdom can come.

We can hold out a gentle light of deep-rooted, safe joy when confronted with the darkness of fear or loss, knowing that each of us is held secure in the hands of a God who is like a shepherd. Peace can be restored.

I want to offer all of this as an image of what we can be as Advent people – people who see the darkness as well as long for the light, and who light a candle anyway – ignited by the comfortable words of God’s presence with us, preparing us to meet with Christ at the end of the journey.

Amen.