

## **Second Sunday in Advent 2020 (06.12.2020)**

### **Isaiah 40: 1 - 11: Mark 1: 1 – 8**

It's the second Sunday of Advent. The second candle is lit on the Advent wreath. And the second candle is for? Prophecy. And therefore our Bible readings abound with prophecy. The Old Testament lesson is a prophecy from Isaiah. The Gospel sets out, not a precise quote of that prophecy, but a composite allusion to the sort of prophecy of which the Isaiah passage is an example; and then it has John the Baptist prophesying about the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. The message of today's service is that the one whose birth we are preparing for – Jesus – is the fulfilment of prophecy.

So, to start with then, we need to understand what prophecy is. It is very important to make it clear that prophecy is not the same thing as prediction. Prediction is saying what is going to happen in the future. So, when a fair ground gypsy gazes into a

crystal ball and says you're going to meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger, that's not a prophecy: it's a prediction. We can predict which horse is going to win the 2.30 at Newmarket. Unfortunately we can't predict it with any certainty. But we can predict it. What we can't do is prophecy about it.

And that's because prophecy is something completely different. Prophecy is a statement of what the fullness of God's kingdom is like; a description of how the world around us falls short of it; and the offer of an opportunity to change one into the other.

In Isaiah chapter 40, the reality of the world around the people of Israel was that they had been defeated and carted away into exile, were living in a foreign land and had lost all the structures and institutions from which they derived their identity. The prophet offers no cheap hope to the people in that situation. In fact, precisely what he does *not* do is predict the overthrow of the Babylonian empire. He says it will go

on and on. But it will come to an end, because all human things must come to an end. And when it does, he will still be God, and the Israelites will still be his people. And what will have changed between them being a subjugated people and them having their relationship with God restored is that God will have forgiven them. And that's one illustration, one model, one type of how God operates: restoration through forgiveness.

The ultimate expression of God operating restoration through forgiveness – of which the passage in Isaiah is merely a prototype – is Jesus. And the prophet John tells the people coming to him in the wilderness that they can be prepared for Jesus by receiving a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There's a neat parallel there, but the relationship between repentance and forgiveness still needs some unpacking.

We don't pay for forgiveness with repentance. We don't trade in sins for forgiveness. It's not as if there's a divine slot machine; and we put our repentance in the slot, pull the handle and then, as a result, get our forgiveness as it's delivered into the tray at the bottom.

If I see a new winter coat advertised, I have to look how much the price is and decide whether I'm prepared to sacrifice my money for it. I may have to get what I've got in my wallet and add to it what's in an envelope at the back of my sock drawer and then perhaps go to the bank to get a bit more out and, if I've got enough, I can then exchange it for the coat. Of course, my fantasy would be that I get to the shop and they say they've decided the coat is free and I can have both the coat and keep my money. That might be unrealistic, but it might well be that I get to the shop and find a 50% sale on so I get to have the coat and keep half my money.

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If that is how repentance and forgiveness worked, what would happen is: I would decide I fancy a bit of forgiveness; so I'd look in my conscience, and I'd find a bit a shouting a few days ago, a bit of putting somebody down and humiliating them last week, a bit of harbouring shameful thoughts about the dishiness of the person in front of me in the queue in Morrisons on Wednesday; and I'd scrape it all together and offer it in exchange for the forgiveness I've decided I fancy. But when I discover that God's forgiveness is free, I don't get to keep my sins as well.

And that's because we don't decide that we fancy a bit of forgiveness. We hear God's call on our lives. And when we are obedient to that call, two things happen simultaneously: we receive forgiveness and our sins no longer stand between us and God.

Advent discipline is about being obedient to the call of God through the prophets; about being sufficiently still to hear that call – not deluding ourselves that it's a

prediction that everything is going to be alright after the 25<sup>th</sup> December, because it won't be: there will still be Covid-19, we'll still have to adjust to new trading arrangements with Europe, there'll still be poverty, there'll still be famine, there'll still be disease; but we'll be part of something bigger, something greater than and something beyond all that; something that sustains us with hope through reality as we find it for now.

Amen.