

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 10th December, 2017

Welcome to Worship – 2nd Sunday in Advent

10.30am Morning Worship led by Rev Andrew Robinson

Including the Sacrament of Holy Communion

6.00pm Town Close with Revd Lisa Quarmby (HC)

A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources

From the exile of complacency, God calls us home.

From the exile of failure, God calls us home.

From the exile of suffering, God calls us home.

From the exile of all that separates us, God calls us home.

Together, let us come home and worship the God who calls.

Living God, as we light our second Advent candle,

may the beauty of its flame call us

to seek out beauty in all its forms;

may this be a time for celebrating your promises,

and for sharing the good news with urgency, passion and joy;

and may your kingdom come, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 40 v1-11 Comfort for God's People

"A voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."

Psalm 85 v1-2, 8-13

"Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps."

2 Peter 3 v8-15a The Day of the Lord

"But in keeping with his promises we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."

Mark 1 v1-8 John the Baptist Prepares the Way

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."

End of Exile

The prophet Isaiah foretold one who cries out: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'. In this week's reading from Mark we hear John proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He says that someone is coming after him, who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.

For those of us living in the comfortable West, it can be hard to imagine true 'wilderness'. Almost every part of our environment has been domesticated in some way by human hands. However, when Isaiah cries out from exile, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord', it is said in full awareness of how dangerous the lonely places can be. The people for whom he speaks – living in exile in Babylon – long for 'comfort' but struggle to find it. Their wilderness is harsh, uncompromising and terrifying. Wild creatures – real and imagined – prowl everywhere.

Part of the challenge ‘comfortable’ modern Christians face is to become open to the harsh realities confronting so many in our world. If Advent is to be taken seriously, we need to treat it as a season of ‘exposure’ to the challenges and realities being faced by people hungry for hope and comfort in a scary world. God – through Isaiah – speaks words of comfort to his people. Isaiah is asked to ‘speak tenderly to Jerusalem’.

For Isaiah – living in Babylon – Jerusalem must have seemed a distant mirage of hope. Yet, another part of the challenge facing people of faith in the modern world is to hold onto hope and love. The world is fragile and – when confronted with global crises, or huge local problems such as homelessness – it can feel impossible to speak words of hope. Isaiah challenges us to do so. He sees that out of the desert and wilderness comes a highway or road for God’s good news. It is our job to proclaim and be faithful. The wilderness is dangerous, but it is also beautiful. It has valleys and mountains. It can take our breath away and help us to sing God’s invitation to travel ‘home’.

A key decision for any storyteller is what details to include and what to omit. This matters as much with the Gospels as with a novel. One of the extraordinary things about this week’s reading from Mark’s Gospel is its urgency. Mark says, ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ Then, with no reference to Jesus’ nativity, we’re off! Without a hint about Jesus’ birth or lineage, we are straight into an account of John the baptizer.

The appearance of the Son of God signals the ultimate end of exile for the people of God. John the baptizer represents the last in a long line of prophets pointing towards the expected Messiah. He urgently calls people to ‘repent’ that is, to ‘turn round’ and return to God. Mark deploys words of Isaiah that we heard in the Old

Testament reading. In doing so, Mark reiterates the sense of urgency. He wants to remind his readers that to point towards Christ (and to follow him) is an urgent matter. John prepares (as the Isaiah reading makes clear) a ‘highway’ for the Lord – that is, a way that enables us to get where we need to be quickly.

The Romans famously made their highways in straight lines. It enabled them to prosecute war and build an empire more easily. But John’s highway prepares us for God himself – in the person of Jesus Christ. Mark knows that no matter how prepared or unprepared we think we are for Christ, we need his presence and holiness urgently. The path we are invited to walk with him will be on holy ground. It will be the road less travelled. It will take us through dangerous wildernesses as well as places of seeming safety. However, rather than being a self-serving highway (such as those the Romans built for their Empire), the ‘Way of God’ calls us out of ourselves. Jesus is ‘the Way’. Even when we feel very far from ‘home’, he leads us from exile into truth.

Both readings negotiate the rigours and challenges of the wilderness. Physical and metaphorical wildernesses are scary places to be. When we are in scary places of exile from others or ourselves we look for trusted voices. We cast around for someone to trust. God, through his servants, makes the paths straight for salvation.

A Sending Out Prayer

May the urgency, the passion and the commitment of John the Baptist, be reflected in your life as you go from here to live and love and serve. In Jesus’ name.

Amen.