

Sermon – Advent 2

BCP St James and All Saints

Mark 1:1-8, Isa 40:1-11

6 Dec 2020



There's been a sense of anticipation and expectation as we've approached this week: the week we come out of Lockdown, the week we hunted through our loft or garage for our Christmas decorations box, the week we put our Christmas trees up. We've even opened the first doors of our Online Community Advent calendar!

And it is with a similar sense of anticipation and excitement that our Gospel writer Mark begins his Gospel. Remember, Mark was a close associate of St Peter and his gospel is often attributed as St Peter's recollections, captured by Mark. Peter was a less well-educated Galilean fisherman and probably turned to a more literate Mark to record this Gospel. That is one of the reasons why no Nativity story is present in Mark's gospel, because Peter became Jesus' disciple in later life - Peter's conversion featuring very early on in chapter 1. We get a sense of pace as the narrative progresses, events and details captured consistent with an eyewitness account. But Mark's gospel doesn't go straight into Jesus's ministry, it initially focuses on someone else's: John the Baptist, today's reading.

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In John's time, there was a sense that Israel had been 'locked down'. Decades then centuries had passed since Israel had a prophet and God must have seemed both distant and silent to his people. Did God still care? Did they matter or were they trudging ahead meaninglessly? And then John comes, a new prophet at last. Was this the moment God was speaking to his people again? There must have been a great sense of building excitement, a feeling of hope and anticipation. No wonder v5 tells us *'the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem went out to meet him'*. This beginning of the consolation of Israel is reflected by Mark, who includes these words of Isaiah: *'Comfort, O comfort my people, speak tenderly to her. In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed'*. (Isa 40:1-3) Mark and Peter are saying ancient prophecies are being fulfilled, hope long awaited is being revealed and heralded by John. Listening to Handel's Messiah in Advent is also a good way to sense this building expectation as the set pieces unfold around these same verses, foretelling the coming of King Jesus. John is straight-talking and his message is not well received by all, however. For John speaks words of challenge as well as comfort: in our lives we need to make room for the coming King and Lord, to make straight the paths. This is not some temporary monarch, inheriting by fortune of birth. This is the eternal King of the universe, the Lord of all, God incarnate. There needs to be some levelling, some re-addressing of our priorities, a turning away from what we've been in the past so a new beginning can be made. And in opening the first doors of our Advent calendar,

we're reminded that God might also be prompting us to open the doors of our hearts that we've perhaps kept closed, and trust him with the contents.



This week our kids have been getting ready for one of the annual school challenges – the ‘*Tough Mudda*’

This is teenage parlance for a cross-country assault course where the main adversary is the accumulation of Somerset mud. And we have plenty of it, for the non-stop rain we've enjoyed recently has created perfect ‘*Tough Mudda*’ conditions. To help distract them from the impending race, we took them on a ramble around Burrington Combe. However, fog obscured our enjoyment of any view down to Blagdon Lake. It was 5C, the sort of temperature where you have to keep going to keep warm. And it turned out this route too was about 80% mud. We stumbled on and the youths grew tired (not to mention the parents). There were protests before the end: there was mud on our boots, mud on our trousers, mud on our coats and mud in our rucksacks. There were times it felt pretty pointless: out in the cold, trudging through mud, the destination obscured.

Perhaps this was not unlike how the Israelites felt: locked down, left out in the cold, not sure of the way ahead, God seeming distant, having to keep going. Maybe we too have felt like we're going through our own ‘*Tough Mudda*’, that for every two steps we progress forward, we slide one back. Perhaps God seems distant, like we haven't heard from Him in a while. St Peter, St Mark, St John the Baptist speak with one accord when they remind us of the word of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah, for there were times when God seemed distant to them too, and they had to carry on, as if wading through mud. But, like the Rock of Ages standing amidst the mud of Burrington Combe, we find God in it with us, and his everlasting words of comfort extend to us, his people:

*‘Comfort O comfort my people.
Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the Earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.’ (Isa 40:1, 28-31)*