

St Brandon's, Sermon for 10th December 2017

Isaiah 40.1-11; Mark 1.1-8

Prepare, and Baptism

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What for you makes a good beginning? If you're starting on a new job, maybe you want to feel you have at least the skills required, the materials and the instructions help.

Beginning a journey, you want to know where you are headed and that you have the right time and necessary provisions: food, petrol, map, tickets.

Most of us like to be a bit prepared, have something of a plan in mind for what we are going to do and when. That's called being on top, being in charge of life and doing okay, which is great, when that's how things are, and we are able to achieve it.

But what happens when we aren't managing so well?

When we feel unequal to the task, unprepared, unfit and not expecting or wishing to begin?

We probably all know what its like to be in both those states, and probably move between them even if we are predominantly in one or the other.

Do you ever get that feeling that you are really un-ready for something that is coming even when you have tried to think what you can do to prepare, and perhaps have made practical arrangements but can't shake off that looming sense of un-readiness?

Recognise it?

It is a horrid feeling, very undermining. I wonder what your favourite ways of trying to shake it off are?

A long walk?

Tidying and cleaning?

Re-checking and tweaking the list?

Phoning a friend?

Praying?

In the first reading we heard the reaction of the Israelites to the news that they might return to their own country and to worshipping again in Jerusalem. Now this may sound familiar but its not the current headlines, this was written in about 550BC,

at which point the Jews had been in exile in Babylon for several generations and had just about lost any hope of ever returning to their own land and ever seeing the fulfilment of the promise that the Messiah - the ultimate saviour - would come.

They felt far from ready for this new beginning: they reckoned they had lost all chance of being saved.

They reckoned their forefathers had been captured and taken off to Babylon because those earlier generations had not paid attention to God. And, although they yearned and prayed for God and wept over the wrong-doings of their ancestors, they didn't feel much certainty that they could ever be re-united with God and with their hopes.

They felt as robust as grass, withering and fading. They were overwhelmed by their own sense of hopelessness and un-readiness.

Yet, they did go back to Israel and Jerusalem, they were sufficiently prepared when the time came.

I wonder what changed it for them?

Was it that they were ready to listen?

And Isaiah was ready to hear and speak for them of God and all the longing God shared for them to be free and freely worshipping him?

Imagine when you are in the grip of the “can't do's”, in dread of that which is coming; imagine God saying to you

“Comfort, Oh Comfort! Lift up your voice with strength, do not fear. With Me, the mountains and valleys can be reduced so they are easy to traverse, even your small concerns – the uneven ground becomes level when we work together.”

Perhaps I am taking a liberty with the text, and its easy to misunderstand what I am trying to say, to hear it as “All your troubles disappear if you have God on side.”

Its not that troubles disappear – those people of ancient Israel were going to have to do a lot of hard work and encounter lots of difficulties in re-building their country, the difference is that God can lift us above the dread and fear so we are stronger for doing what we have to do.

It is the difference of knowing we are being loved and cared for in the way a shepherd feeds and tends to his lambs, carrying us next to his heart when necessary, leading us gently.

That changes us.

This is picked up in the second reading we heard, which were the opening words of Mark's gospel.

Its not easy to know how to begin a story, what will set the scene and get our attention, what will define what the story is to be about. The Gospel-writer, Mark, chose to echo these reassurances of who God is for us, and most importantly, who Jesus is for us, right in his opening lines.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’”.

A bit of a paraphrasing of what we heard read from Isaiah but nonetheless, making a direct connection between those ancient Jews wanting to be released from exile in Babylon, and the Jews living back in their own country, 550 years on, and needing to be alert to something big that was coming from God.

Needing to listen, not this time to Isaiah but to the strange figure of John the Baptist.

He was preaching that people needed to turn back to God, repent of their wrong-doings and be baptised by him, John, in the river Jordan in readiness for the coming.

That great invitation to be part of God's plan simply by turning towards God and away from their worst selves.

They were to be prepared and symbolically cleaned by being washed by John in the river Jordan.

Almost the next bit in this gospel from Mark is Jesus himself, presenting himself to be baptised in the Jordan by John, and a spectacular alighting of God's Spirit onto him as he comes up out

of the water.

John baptises with water but, as we heard, John proclaimed that the one coming – Jesus Christ – would baptise us not just with water but with the Holy Spirit.

Before he died, Jesus reiterated this promise that he would send his Spirit, and that happened – his many followers were filled with his Spirit soon after his dying, rising to new life and returning to God the Father.

The Spirit has remained in and among all those who follow Christ ever since.

It is the bit that is active inside us and enables us to know God. The Spirit is the mysterious life and love generating force that comes with belief – the active seeking of, the risen Lord.

It is the mechanism that enables us to feel guided, strengthened, carried as necessary, and to have the strength to do that for others.

It is the coming of the Lord into an individual's life, today. It is the way we enter into the ancient from-the-beginning-of-creation plans of God for us to the one-day-return-of-the-Lord-at-the-end-of-all-time, what we call 'the second coming'.

Today, baby Hazel is brought by her family to be baptised.

We will use water, and in the prayer blessing the water, you will hear reference to another of the great rescue plans of God for his people: the crossing of the Red Sea.

You will hear the connection between cleansing with water, Jesus' death cleansing us from sin, and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon Hazel.

Hazel's parents and Godparents make the promises and commitment on Hazel's behalf (after all, she is only a tiny baby) and commit to teaching and guiding her in the faith as she grows.

Hazel's mum, Amy, has invested much thought and prayer in preparation for this moment, and has written a poem with which to bless Hazel's new beginning. We will hear this directly after the baptising.

But first, and importantly, as Mark's opening passage shows us, those parents and godparents who will guide Hazel's faith journey will be invited to state their commitment in turning toward Jesus Christ and away from their worst selves.

We too, are invited to join them in those vows, reminding ourselves that Advent is particularly a season of timeless promises and new beginnings.