

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

Today we are looking at the opening verses of Mark's gospel. A gospel that we will be reading all the way through the year ahead in our set readings on Sundays. And it's interesting to see how it starts.

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

So we might expect to start hearing the story of Jesus – but we don't.

Mark begins by giving us a couple of quotes from the Old Testament. These quotes though don't refer to Jesus Christ, but to the forerunner, the "one crying in the wilderness".

And in verse 4 it becomes apparent that Mark sees this forerunner as John the Baptist. Mark then goes on to tell us about him. So before we meet Jesus, the story begins with John.

And this is true in all the gospels.

Matthew and Luke tell us something of the birth of Jesus – the well known stories of stables and shepherds and wise men and stars that we will be thinking of over the Christmas period – and then they talk about John.

And John the gospel writer also first introduces Jesus as the word made flesh, and then goes on to talk about John the baptist.

Clearly John the baptist is a very important character in the story of Jesus. But he is also a bit of an enigma. What do we make of him? There's an interesting article about John the Baptist from one of our church members in the Parish Magazine this month that gives some insights – it's well worth a read.

But perhaps today we would do well to begin by looking at that Isaiah passage we have as our Old Testament reading – the one from which Mark quotes.

The context of the Isaiah 40 passage is that the nation – Israel – is returning from an exile in Babylon. The exile was a result of the people having turned away from God. The return from exile signified that something new was beginning. Israel had served her term, the penalty had been paid. Here was an offer of forgiveness and a new start. This was the comforting message Isaiah was bringing.

This restoration is shown in picture language by the promise that the mountains and valleys would be levelled, that there would be a straight path for God to lead them forward through what seemed like a desert into a glorious future. The prophet goes on to say that the promise was secure - that although grass withers and flowers fade, God's word would stand forever. This glorious future that God has promised is sure.

The promise continues. These are indeed good tidings - God will gather up his flock in his arms and carry them close to his heart. God will not just lead them forward, but will carry them every step of the way, protecting them and shielding them.

Such is the message of hope that Isaiah brought to the people many centuries before.

And as with many prophecies in the Old Testament, this one operates on multiple time scales. It was true in the time of Isaiah and John the Baptist is claiming its truth for his time too.

In John's day the nation was in turmoil. There was an occupying army – the Romans; freedom was limited and life was hard. Herod was merely a puppet ruler. The religion which in the past had been a beacon of hope now seemed like a millstone around the neck. It felt like the nation was again in some kind of exile.

And it was into this situation that John did not just proclaim the promises that Isaiah had spoken about, but acted them out. He was the voice that Isaiah talked about. He was the voice preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness – the wilderness that mirrored the despair of the nation. He was the voice making a way for God; urging people to turn back to him.

How much John knew of how God was going to restore the nation we don't know – but he was certain it would happen. He knew that there was one to come after him, and as time went on he came to see that this was Jesus. But all four gospel writers wanted to show there was a continuity of the promises of God through time – that the story of Jesus was the fulfilment of the old prophecies. And John acting out those words of Isaiah in the way he did was the perfect way of showing this.

But as I have said, the prophecy of Isaiah operates across time. It applied to the exiles returning from Babylon; it applied to John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus and I think we can also see that it could apply to us today.

The message of hope that we can offer the world today is the same – God promising a new future; the mess of the past can be put behind us; we can look forward knowing that God – through Jesus – is with us, not simply leading us into the future but carrying us close to his heart.

The world needs hope at this time. We all know 2020 has been a year we would want to forget. And God is saying that we don't have to be defined by what has happened – either by our own pasts or by what has happened around us. In Christ we have the prospect of a new future.

So each one of us can be a voice preparing the way of the Lord. A voice crying out to help people who are stuck in the desert to see a new future. We can be that voice in practical ways, by helping and supporting those around us. We can be that voice by praying for the parish – as we are doing in the Advent prayer chain. And we can be that voice by sharing the story of Christmas; by letting people know the good news story of Jesus – God with us.

This Advent and Christmas we are encouraging people to place stars in their windows as a sign of hope for the community. The wise men followed a star which led them to the Christ child. We as members of the churches in Shirley can point people towards the sure and certain hope that God promises through the coming of Christ. We can each one of us be a voice that brings God's word of comfort to his people.