



Second Sunday Advent. 2006.

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 2 Peter 3:8-14 Mark 1:1-8

“Comfort, give comfort to my people”.

We are all familiar with these words of Isaiah which Handel used in his great work, *Messiah*.

I have said before that the selection of verses for the lectionary can sometimes cut across the understanding of the passage in its context. It is helpful to go back a few sentences and then forward to see how the chosen reading fits within the text. The concept of chapters as divisions was a later addition to the scriptures.

The people in exile needed to hear words of comfort. The direction to be comforters is to a group not an individual. Isaiah had told the king he would lose everything, especially after his display of wealth to the enemy, but the king was not convinced.

Now the people are in exile, and the thin veneer of power and worldly glory boasted of by Hezekiah is gone like grass in a drought.

God gives directions to the comforters.

First, speak tenderly.

Those who have suffered from their wrong-doing do not need to be reminded of what they have done.

Second, proclaim that the sin is forgiven and God’s mercy is available in abundance.

Now we hear the voice of a Comforter.

In the desert prepare a processional route. God is coming.

What follows sounds as if an army of bulldozers will be needed. The image is of a radical transformation. Some of the power of the passage is lost to us because we have learned that the landscape can be made to bend to our will. We are familiar with the cutting of roads through areas that were once thought to be inaccessible. We are also familiar with the upheaval and radical transformation caused by the elements.

The revelation of God-in-glory, Shekinah, fire and cloud that images God’s abiding presence, will fill the earth and the Word of God will be available to all. The exodus is evoked again with the call to the herald.

As Miriam led the women in song and dance to proclaim the greatness of God who saves his people, so each generation needs to be reminded that God dwells among us.

Mark begins his Gospel, the proclamation of Good News, with the reminder that the ancient promise is still being carried out in our midst. The beginning... recalls Genesis, and offers a new creation. A new Voice proclaims once again that God is present. We are again reminded that a radical transformation is required. It is the landscape of our hearts that needs to be re-shaped.

The message of John the Baptist is of repentance and renewal. His baptism was not about initiation or belonging, but conversion. It is a sign of the call, "Turn back to me with all your heart." A fresh start suggests that all was not well with the old, or that circumstances have forced the new upon us.

The last sentence of our passage, "I have baptised you in water; he will baptise you in the Holy Spirit", points to the necessity of whole-hearted repentance and conversion of heart as a basic prerequisite for life as a disciple, one on fire with the Holy Spirit.

Advent is a time of renewal as we celebrate the seasonal reminder of the presence of God with us. God-with-us is not some possession which confers special privileges, but a reality which calls us to be comforters, saviours.

When we read of people who use their talents and position to bring hope and comfort to others, the poor, physically, spiritually and emotionally, then we begin to know what God-with-us might mean. It also calls us to examine our own discipleship.

Has our own "landscape" been radically transformed?
Have we helped others to transform theirs?

Patricia Stevenson rsj.

