

Lessons      Isaiah 40: 1 – 11

St Mark 1: 1 – 8

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

Holy God, stillness at the centre of all things, may we know Your stillness, the shalom of Your Spirit, the essence of the Eternal in our hearts, now and always. Amen.

The Old Testament lesson for today, the Second Sunday of Advent, is the opening verses from Isaiah 40: ‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.’ After 40 years of exile, imprisoned in the strange and foreign city of Babylon, the Hebrew people are freed, liberated by the Persian king, Cyrus, who lets them return to home, to their beloved Jerusalem. God’s message is one of comfort. The prophet said:

[God] will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.

This poetic prophecy is one of tenderness, compassion and love abounding: ‘Comfort, O comfort my people.’ There are passages in the Old Testament which are particularly brutal, but this is not one of them. Here we glimpse the glory of God, the God of Moses, the God

who liberates, who hears the cries of human suffering and, through human agency, comes to help.

The exile began in 587BC when many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem were forcibly taken hostage and held for decades in Babylon. Their release from a place of bondage and return to the promised land is a similar story to that of the slavery of the Hebrew people centuries earlier in Egypt. The ancient narrative of Exodus may be historical or it may be myth or an imaginative mixture of the two. If we go back several thousand years in human history, we see Babylon and Egypt as great civilisations; agricultural peoples who settled in river valleys. By contrast, the Hebrews were pastoral people 'dwelling in tents' with 'no abiding city'. In the Exodus myth, the Hebrew people know that this world is not their home: they are citizens of heaven; pilgrims and strangers on Earth. Babylon and Egypt may have given us agriculture, pottery, weaving, metal work, mathematics and astronomy, but they are the forerunners of modern-day powers, powers that trust in this world, in an ideology of materialism. In the Exodus myth, we see the tensions that run through human history, through our story: we are in the world, but not of the world. Our desire for satisfaction, fulfillment, for our homeland, can never be

satisfied by anything in this world. On our pilgrimage, we hear the words of the Eternal echo through Scripture: 'Comfort, O comfort my people'.

The Gospel lesson for today is the opening verses of Mark. We hear the story of John the baptizer in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The opening verses of the earliest Gospel begins with three key words: wilderness, baptism and forgiveness. If the first chapter of Mark's Gospel is an introduction to Jesus, we learn the ministry of Jesus is centred on wilderness, baptism and forgiveness.

Wilderness? Stories of wilderness, of desert experiences, are common across religious traditions. In the time of the Upanishads the Vedic poets retired deep into forests to meditate. The Buddha left home and became an ascetic until he found enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. John the Baptist invited followers into the desert. Jesus began His ministry with six solitary weeks in the wilderness. After his conversion, St Paul spent three years hidden away in the deserts of Arabia. In the myth of the Exodus, the Hebrew people journeyed forty years through the desert, through the wilderness. In

the Exile, the Israelites spent forty years in the desert experience of Babylon. The Early Church Father, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa understood the wilderness as a symbol of the soul's journey to God. Gregory said that it was in the desert that Moses climbed Mount Sinai and entered the cloud, the darkness, and enjoyed union with Eternity. For Gregory, the Eucharist was entering the cloud, the darkness, moving beyond sense and reason, and enjoying the union and communion of love.

St Mark's second word is baptism. John was the baptizer, the immerser. Within Judaism, ritual cleansing was well-established. Immersion often took place in a river or spring: it was important that it was living water with movement and energy, clean and a source of life. Baptising people in the River Jordan, John's work would bring to life the power of the Exodus myth: it was through the Jordan that the people entered the Promised Land. Their ancestors had moved from one world to the next: the Jordan was a symbol of liberation. Immersion was often accompanied by prayer. Mystics and others would use ritual cleansing as a way of preparation for worship on the Sabbath. John's offer of repentance and the forgiveness of sins undercut the religious claim of the Temple where

the priests controlled forgiveness for a fee, a fee many of the poor could not afford. The poor (or the poor in spirit) went into the desert to John and there they found freedom, liberation and a taste of eternity. Biblical stories operate at different levels all the time.

Jesus was baptised by John. After His baptism, in an inner vision, Jesus saw the *Ruach haKodesh*, the Spirit of God, descending like a dove upon Him and a voice saying, 'This is my child, the child I love, the child in whom I take great delight.' This is a vision for every baptism: to discover that we are beloved souls, loved by our Heavenly Father, our Divine Mother. In the opening verses of the earliest Gospel, we are introduced to the desert experience, to liberation and to intimacy and union with God.

The final word the evangelist stresses is forgiveness. In a recent public lecture, the former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, David Lunan, one of our own tradition's truly spiritual leaders, spoke of healing, of wholeness and holiness. In one anecdote, Lunan cited the story of Dr Margaret Blackwell, who is buried in Kilmun, near the Holy Loch. Margaret Blackwell was the

first woman in Britain to appear on the medical register; the year was 1859. Her grave is marked by a Celtic cross which carry her words:

It is only when we have learned to recognise that God's law for the human body is as sacred as, nay is one with, God's law for the human soul that we shall begin to understand the religion of health.

Carl Jung said that most of the people he saw, people over fifty, would be healed if they could forgive or be forgiven. Lunan also cited the experience of the comedian Billy Connolly. In a recent interview, Connolly said that he had learned the art of nothingness, of the immense power of silence; advice he was given by Sean Connery. Connolly's mother left home when he was four. He and his sister Florence were brought up and bullied by two aunts. When his father returned from serving in the RAF in Burma, Billy was physically and sexually abused by him. Connolly says:

Forgiveness: it's the answer to everything. The abuse didn't bother me much as a child. It was after his death it got worse. I thought it would go away but it didn't. It kept recurring in my mind. I read a book about forgiveness that [my wife] gave me, about taking the load off your shoulders, putting it down and walking away. It's like having a rucksack full of rocks. You're carrying around this guilt. Shame. Nobody's told you you can walk away from it, but it's a miracle. It works. You can't let it dominate. It'll make you sick.'

Connelly says forgiveness is a miracle: it's the answer to everything.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has written about his sense of guilt

because he, as a young boy, regularly witnessed his father verbally

and physically abuse his mother. Tutu says:

If I dwell on those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back, in the same ways he hurt my mother, and in ways of which I was incapable as a small boy. I see my mother's face and I see this gentle human being whom I loved so very much and who did nothing to deserve the pain inflicted on her.

When I recall this story, I realise how difficult the process of forgiving truly is. Intellectually, I know my father caused pain because he himself was in pain. Spiritually, I know my faith tells me my father deserves to be forgiven as God forgives us all. But it is still difficult.

Tutu tells us that 'forgiveness takes practice, honesty, open-

mindedness and a willingness....to try.' He says:

It isn't easy. Perhaps you have already tried to forgive someone and just couldn't do it. Perhaps you have forgiven and the person did not show remorse or change his or her behaviour.....It is perfectly normal to want to hurt back when you have been hurt. But hurting back rarely satisfies. We think it will, but it doesn't. If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness over the fact that you have struck me.

The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace.

Tutu recalls the occasion when his father asked to speak to him. Tutu had driven for hours and was tired. He told his father, 'We'll talk in the morning.' That night his father died. Tutu was grief-stricken. He said, 'It has taken me many, many years to forgive myself for my insensitivity, for not honouring my father one last time with the few moments he wanted to share with me. Honestly, the guilt still stings.' Part of Tutu's journey has been to acknowledge his own anger, anger that as a boy he did not stand up to his abusive father. He realised that he needed to forgive himself. Tutu wonders if the three hardest words to say are 'I am sorry'.

'Comfort, O comfort my people' says God. Human beings are the most complex creatures: we – all of us – are kind and not so kind, creative and destructive, selfless and selfish, forgiving and in need of forgiveness. Like the Hebrew slaves in the myth, God is in our desert experiences, in the cloud, elusive and present; God speaks words of love in baptism, and God is there in forgiveness. Jesus' breathed forgiveness every day. In the Jewish tradition, people do not take the blood of an animal because the blood is sacred; it is the life of the animal given by God. Alongside that it was believed that in taking the blood of an animal we would be taking on the characteristics of

the animal. What was Jesus doing when He said, 'This is My blood'?  
Could it be that He meant that we are to take on His characteristics,  
characteristics of breathing forgiveness, of sharing God's love? Is  
that what we do at the Holy Table?

Amen.