

Mark 1:1-8; Isaiah 40:1-11 Christian Hope
6th December 2020, online and in CCO

Father, may we hear your word of hope to us, and may it take root deep in our hearts. Amen.

You will have noticed that our Gospel reading from St Mark quotes from the first reading from the prophet Isaiah. The book of Isaiah was written a good seven hundred years or so before the birth of Jesus, and was a well-known, much studied part of the Hebrew scriptures. Mark tells us that the messenger, the herald that Isaiah was writing about, the one who was to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, was none other than John the Baptist.

Mark's community would have known all about John the Baptist. They or their parents might even have met him, have heard him preach and seen him baptize in the river Jordan. They would also be aware of what happened to him: imprisoned and then beheaded by Herod. He was something of an outsider during his life, and his death was wretched. Yet Mark recognizes in him the one sent by God to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus, the Lord.

And his audience would have understood what that meant. John the Baptist was the one sent to bring comfort to the people, to announce the forgiveness of sins, to proclaim God's word to his people:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;^[a]
lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,^[a]
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah: "Here is your God!"

That is the key message: "Here is your God!" Interestingly, all the translations I looked at say "Here is your God!" while the Good News translation says "Your God is coming". It might seem just a detail, but I think it is a really important difference and here's why: 'Your God is coming' indicates that he hasn't arrived yet. We must keep looking and waiting. 'Your God is here' is a statement of faith, that God's actual presence really is here, with us. Right now. We don't have to wait any longer. We don't have to look any further. Jesus has come, God is here, Emmanuel, God with us.

And that is the source of our Christian hope. What it tells us is that Jesus truly is God in human form. That God came to live among us at Christmas. And that he has stayed, making his home in any heart which will welcome him in. The Jews waited a long long time for their Saviour, the Messiah, to come. We don't have to wait for him any more.

We are the lucky ones. We know the story. We know that there was a time when people didn't know that God is a God of love, and mercy and compassion. We know there was a time when the world did not know Jesus, when people were unaware that the Holy Spirit of God could dwell in them, healing them, transforming their lives. We know that, because of God's love, we can be confident that at the end of time, love will be seen to conquer all, and all creation will be reconciled with God, brought into a state of peace and harmony.

That is the essence of our hope: the ultimate victory over death and evil has been won. It may not feel that way: we have our battles, even daily battles to fight against sin, against our own waywardness and self-centredness; we see evil in the world around us; we have viruses and diseases wrecking lives; and we will all have to face our own physical death some day. But that is not the end of the story, not the end of our story. The battles may still rage, but the war has been won. And we do not battle alone. Remember, Jesus said to his followers: 'I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Matt.28:20)

We might think of hope as something to do with things in the future, but for the Christian, even if it looks to the future, hope is rooted in the present: 'it is rooted in a relationship with the God who speaks to me here and now, who calls me to make specific choices in my life. The seeds of the future are found in a present relationship with God.' (Taize)

Because of this relationship, our hope is not just optimism or mere wishful thinking. Because of what we know about God, because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are led to discover seeds of a new world already present today: our eyes are opened to see God at work in all sorts of people and places. And this hope is also 'a source of energy to live differently, not according to the values of a society based on the thirst for possession and competition' (Taize).

By the Spirit of Christ, believers are called, are impelled 'to live in deep solidarity with a humanity cut off from its roots in God'. 'Our faith is not a privilege that takes us out of the world; we "groan" with the world, sharing its pain, but we live this situation in hope,

knowing that, in Christ, "the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining" (1John 2:8)

Our hope means that even and perhaps especially at times like this when the world is in crisis; even when we cannot understand what is happening and why; even when the darkness looks as though it might be winning – even then we can trust that the light will always shine on, and the darkness cannot put it out. Because the light is the light of God's love, and God is forever, and his love will never change, will never fail; God's love for humankind stretches back to the very beginning, and goes forward into eternity.

We can trust that he wants to live his life in us. He wants us to welcome this Life by a yes spoken by our whole being. And as we work with him, we shall be empowered to create little signs of a different way forward, a better future here and now, in the midst of the difficulties of the world, seeds of renewal that will bear fruit when the time comes.

So, be comforted, my people. Your God is here! Amen.