

## **CHESTER CATHEDRAL Cathedral Eucharist 10am 4.12.11**

Canon Christopher Humphries

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent**

Readings: Isaiah 40 v 1 – 11; Mark 1 v 1 – 8

### **Theme: Good news of the Kingdom**

My wife Barbara and I have recently come back from 2 weeks travelling around India.

Interestingly, the most frequently asked question we have had is “Did you get Delhi belly?” Happily the answer is no. Though we did eat curry literally morning, noon and night. Perhaps that was our secret! But seriously, there were precautions that we took and preparations that we made before travelling to a part of the world so different to our own. We had various jabs, and took a course of malaria tablets. And to avoid the dreaded Delhi belly we always cleaned our teeth in bottled water, and looked at the provenance of any rice dishes, checking whether they were freshly cooked or re-heated.

PAUSE

Prepared. Forewarned and forearmed. Handy when going to India, but also the clarion call for Advent. Be ready. Be awake and alert.

If we ignore this advice in spiritual terms the result is not so much an upset tummy but being upset and even overwhelmed by the way the world seems to be. Doubting that God is ultimately in control. Letting the Bad News dampen our spirits and prevent us from being messengers of the kingdom, bringers of Good News.

And there’s plenty in the news currently to concern us... the continuing financial crisis in the Eurozone which can only make it harder for our own country to get back on an even keel. Protests and strikes emphasizing the disquiet and discontent of many folk who are feeling their own prospects and jobs and even pensions threatened.

The international climate change conference in Durban has barely made it into our papers, let alone the front page. This is surely worrying because the seriousness of the threat to our planet hasn’t diminished and time is short for concerted and united action from the nations of the world. The melting of the polar ice cap might well be disastrous for polar bears, but some see it as just the beginning of the human race reaping what it has sown in terms of misuse and even wanton abuse of God’s beautiful world and its resources.

Firmly on the front pages has been the storming of the British Embassy in Iran and the assertion of the Iranian Ayatollah that “now is the time of Islam”. Religious extremism of every kind is alarming and dangerous, particularly when it takes on this apocalyptic tone.

Feeling better?!

Now I don't mean to send you home worried and fearful. But this is the world in which we live. This is the world that desperately needs a Saviour, a message of hope to illuminate dark times. And in today's readings, that message of hope shines out.

The people of Israel at the time of the prophet Isaiah had not had much good news for a long time. The dire predictions of Jeremiah the prophet had come true. The city of Jerusalem had fallen to King Nebuchadnezzar in the year 587 BC and some 10,000 of its citizens carted off to Babylon, near present day Baghdad, to spend many years in exile. They were downhearted. With the psalmist they would sing "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?". They were downcast and downtrodden, spiritually at a low ebb. Like a light shining in the darkness, the prophet Isaiah brings his message of hope. He senses that now is not the time to berate them further with the fact of their sin and rebellion against God in times past. Now is the time to emphasize that God has not abandoned them, but in fact still has an important purpose and plan for them that involves them returning to Jerusalem. "Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid."

So Isaiah is inspired to proclaim a message of mercy and forgiveness, of restoration and return to the Promised land. The exiled Israelites would be familiar with the impressive processional highways built for the victory parades of the Babylonian army. Isaiah picks up this image and uses it to declare the Lord God's victory against all odds, bringing his people home. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

And this restoration of God's people will have an impact across the whole region and beyond, bearing witness to the power of God to save. "Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." An upbeat and stirring message for a people who had had their fill of bad times and bad news. And to my mind, this is a message we can easily relate to, a message that has a clear connection for us with the world as we find it in our own day.

Believers in Jesus Christ are liberated from the fear that renders us static and immobile, like rabbits trapped in the headlights of an onrushing vehicle. God is greater than our troubles. A prayer from last Sunday's service struck me... "When the Lord comes, may he find us not sleeping in sin, but active in service and joyful in his praise." We are set free to serve God.

In the progression through Advent, the arrival of John the Baptist is a spine-tingling moment, and many of the ordinary Jewish folk in Israel picked up that sense that this was indeed a special time. They flocked out to the wilderness where John was preaching and baptising. Not for hundreds of years had Israel seen anything like it. Imagine the impact of this wild man in camel's hair coat. He was bound to be on a collision course with the religious and civil authorities. He lived his message and his whole life was a protest against holier than thou judgemental religion, and against corrupt rulers. In the end, John paid with his life because he disturbed people, stirred them up, and dared to challenge the way that powerful people lived.

The lead up to the commercial Christmas can too easily become twee and cosy. Thankfully John the Baptist rescues us from all that. In the words of our first hymn today "Yea, let us each our hearts prepare, for Christ to come and enter there."

You know, that's worth pondering. If God is to dwell in your heart and mine, then a deal of clearing out, and cleansing and honest preparation needs to take place. "Repent" says John "Turn away from sin, and turn back to God." So, yes, Advent is a penitential season, when our prayers, our hymns and readings are designed to help us take a look at ourselves, to recognise again our shortcomings, our need of God's mercy and grace. And to have the humility to seek his forgiveness and healing.

Back to India for a moment, or rather to the coming home from India.

In the words of the Frank Sinatra song:

"It's nice to go trav'ling, but it's oh so nice to come home."

And on arriving home, suddenly here we were in Advent, and the lead up to Christmas.

It was as if we'd travelled in Dr. Who's time-machine, instead of the jet from Mumbai!

In the cathedral office I was surrounded by moustachioed and bearded people – and with the aid of stick-on ones, I'm not just talking about the fellas!

Yes, it had been November, and our staff had decided to do something practical to support for Prostate Cancer charities.

Outside the Abbey gateway a cheerfully decorated stall had appeared as part of the city's Christmas market, filled with goodies from the Cathedral shop, with our shop staff and volunteers doing a great job, not only in manning the stall, but in being such a positive advert for the cathedral as a whole.

These are 2 simple but striking examples of what it means to be active in the Lord's service, being part of his kingdom of justice and joy.  
In the midst of much darkness, letting the Good News be heard and seen.

Advent is a penitential season, but its about thoughtful and reflective minds, not long faces.  
Less about hair shirts, and more about moments of contemplation and making space for God.