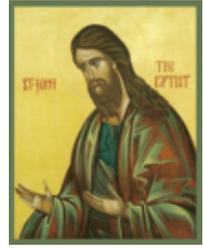


10th December 2017

Advent 1

Purple



Collect

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honour and glory, now and for ever. **Amen**

Isaiah 40:1-11 English Standard Version (ESV)

Comfort for God's People

40¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The Word of God Stands Forever

⁶ A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

The Greatness of God

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" ¹⁰ Behold,

the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

COMMENT: With words of incredible power the unknown prophet of Israel's exile in Babylon proclaims the good news God's people have been waiting long to hear. Deliverance is at hand. God's people are to be brought home to Jerusalem. It is God who is doing this, as a shepherd leads his flock homeward at the end of the day. The lifting up of the valley, and the lowering of hills is exactly what is done in the creation of a highway – a highway back to Jerusalem, a highway back to God. Anyone who has sung or listened to Handel's "The Messiah" will recognise that he took the opening recitatives for his majestic oratorio from this passage. The words of this Hebrew poetry are music in themselves.

Mark 1:1-8 English Standard Version (ESV)

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 ¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^[a] ²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet^[b], "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, ³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare^[c] the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" ⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Footnotes: Some manuscripts omit *the Son of God*. b. Some manuscripts in *the prophets*. c. or *crying: Prepare in the wilderness*.

COMMENT: Mark's Gospel begins not with Jesus, but with John the Baptist. Immediately he quotes from Isaiah 40, using this reference to the prophet of Israel's return from exile in Babylon in 639 BC to the coming of the Messiah. Obviously, he intended that the Baptist be seen as the prophet

who prepared the way for Jesus, the Christ/Messiah. This was an intentional use of the Old Testament scriptures for a serious theological purpose. This reuse of Prophecy (already fulfilled in the return of the exiles) was common amongst Rabbis, who searched the Hebrew Scriptures for every possible prophecy about the coming of Israel's Messiah, and they understood the coming of the Messiah into the world as the ultimate fulfilment of those prophecies. Mark concentrates on the repentance John called for as the appropriate preparation for the coming of the Messiah (verse 4). He downplays John's role and pointed instead to the one who would baptise the people with the Holy Spirit instead of water.

Much scholarly discussion still surrounds the character of John and his mission. It would appear that he was recognised more as one of the Old Testament prophets whose habits were such as to draw attention to his ministry. His call for baptism, however, must have seemed unusual to most Jews of his time. The custom of baptising converts to Judaism would have been regarded as an affront to Jewish self-consciousness. In other words he was saying you are not the people of God – come and be baptised to become the people of God – an insult indeed to those who considered themselves to be perfect Jews! The essential point of John's message was that only a new beginning symbolised by passing through the waters of Jordan, as God had led Israel out of Egypt and across the Jordan, would suffice to restore Israel's relationship with God. In the immersion of baptism these presumptions and the whole of old ways of life would be washed away symbolically. Now that God's love and purpose for Israel were being fulfilled, John called everyone to prepare by repenting and being baptised.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 *Benedixisti, Domine* Grail Psalter

℟ Let us see, O Lord, your mercy, and give us your saving help.

¹ *For the Choirmaster. Of the sons of Korah. A Psalm.*

² O Lord, you once favoured your land
and revived the fortunes of Jacob,

³ you forgave the guilt of your people
and covered all their sins. ℟

⁹ I will hear what the Lord God has to say,
a voice that speaks of peace,
peace for his people.

¹⁰ His help is near for those who fear him
and his glory will dwell in our land. ℟

¹¹ Mercy and faithfulness have met;
justice and peace have embraced.

¹² Faithfulness shall spring from the earth
and justice look down from heaven.

℟ Let us see, O Lord, your mercy, and give us your saving help.

¹³ The Lord will make us prosper
and our earth shall yield its fruit.

¹⁴ Justice shall march before him
and peace shall follow his steps. **℟**

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: This Psalm was probably written during the same period when Israel's return from exile was imminent or has already occurred. It may have had a liturgical function at some national celebration. The psalm consists of three rather distinct parts. Vss. 1-3 celebrates The LORD's initiative in Israel's history. Verses 4-7 plead for forgiveness based on the covenant relationship between the LORD and Israel. Vss. 8-13 recite the blessings that come from the mutual faithfulness of the covenant – forgiveness, righteousness, peace and prosperity. Scholars debate whether this is a lament or a liturgical prayer. The Book of Haggai suggests a pertinent time of economic and spiritual depression when it could have been appropriate. Yet there are no certain historical references. Moreover, the latter part of the poem can be just as easily interpreted eschatologically (pointing to the last things). On the whole, the psalm deals with divine initiatives which result in salvation, whether at a time of imminent danger or at the end of time.

Post Communion

Father in heaven, who sent your Son to redeem the world and will send him again to be our judge: give us grace so to imitate him in the humility and purity of his first coming that, when he comes again, we may be ready to greet him with joyful love and firm faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The Blessing

Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you, scatter the darkness from before your path, and make you ready to meet him when he comes in glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen**