

Advent 2020: Week 2

Watching with the Prophets

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'

See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He 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. [Isaiah 40.1-4,9-11]

From Luigi Gioia's talk:

Jennens chose the lines quoted above because he thought that they epitomize the three benchmarks of authentic prophecy, that is of any form of true preaching or proclamation of God's intention for humanity - namely *first* "Give comfort to my people", *second* "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem" and *third* be a "herald of good news" (Isaiah 40.1,2,9).

We know whether preachers, spiritual counsellors, theologians, and musicians, are actually speaking, singing or acting in God's name only if their words and acts allow listeners to experience God's comfort, tenderness, and joy – to hear the unmistakable tone of God's real voice, not only in Scripture, but also in the many other ways in which it tries to speak to us...

The expression 'good tidings' became the name of the new literary genre created by the first disciples to describe Jesus's words and deeds, the gospels, which in Greek is *euaggelion* that is 'good news'. The evangelists understood that the whole message and life of Jesus were good tidings, that is the way in which the Father had intervened in history to come to our help and give us the joy that nobody can take away from us (cf. John 16.22).

A charming philological detail in the first line of Mark's Gospel confirms this point and gives an even deeper insight into the real nature of 'good news': "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God" (Mark 1.1). The second genitive ("of") in this sentence is deliberately ambiguous. It can either mean "the good news under the form of words which speak of Jesus Christ" or "the good news *which is* Jesus Christ". We can welcome God only when, through Mark's words, we meet Jesus himself, we hear the Father's voice in him, and thus we are given access to the life transforming experience of God's tenderness...

Jesus promises us the whole truth. Not, however, as something that we can repackage into sentences or ideas once and for all. Just as the gospel is not only the written text but Jesus himself, so is truth: "I am the truth" – the truth is Jesus himself (John 14.6). This kind of truth

will never be entirely at our disposal. Jesus' sentence: "The Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth" (John 16.13) means that coming into God's truth is the work of a lifetime for each of us and a task that will occupy churches and humanity until the end of times.

Comforting

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Genuine comfort springs from compassion; it is sensitive to the other's pain. It knows that easy words are not enough. The one who comforts stays with the one who suffers, holding them with love in so far as they are able.

Go back to a moment when another person comforted you. How were they for you in this moment?

God comes to comfort you. Where and how do you need that comfort? Open yourself to what God desires to give – not in easy answers, but through presence and through love.



Speaking tenderly

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem

Tender words, not harsh words. Often our own voice of self-judgement is harsh. God speaks tenderly.

Is your God one who speaks tenderly?
Or is your God the echo of all who have judged you and found you wanting?

Let go to God your harsh words of self-condemnation.

Open your heart to God's tender words, like rain falling on dry land, or the warmth of the sun transforming the cold of deep shadow.

Receiving and sharing Good News

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice...

The Good News is Jesus. This Jesus comes not only for everyone but for each one – for you. He comes to enter your places of fear. Or is it that he is already present for you within your places of fear, waiting for you to recognise him there for you? Open yourself to his comfort; his tender words.

Each day this week, watch with the prophets for any moment where you are called to comfort another, or to speak tenderly – whether in words or in actions.

Preparing the way

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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.



In prayer ask for discernment about any step you can take to open up the way to deeper relationship with God. Are you invited to go into the wilderness of silence and receptivity before God? Is there anything you might have to let go of to make room for this deeper encounter?

What barriers to relationship do you want to ask God to remove?

Bible passages for prayer and reflection:
Isaiah 41.17-20; Luke 1.67-80; Luke 3.1-17;
Psalm 130; Hosea 11.1-9