

Sermon by Peter S Heslam at St John's Church, Hills Road, Cambridge, UK
Second Sunday of Advent (10th Dec 2017)
Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms (Isa 40.11a)*

'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God' (Isa 40.1). These eight words come at the start of a fifteen-chapter song that contains some of the bible's most powerful words of hope. They capture the song's core theme: that God sees the fears and anguish of his people and wishes to relieve them.

This message, with its exquisite phrasing, would have sounded even more amazing and beautiful to its original audience than it does today. That's saying something, as we can hardly hear them without simultaneously hearing Handel's magnificent rendition of them in his *Messiah* oratorio.

This is because the Israelites were in exile. They were not only homesick but 'heartsick' - ridden by guilt for an exile they had brought upon themselves for having departed from God's ways. Although they longed for a deliverer who would ransom them from captivity, by the time these words were uttered they had virtually given up all hope of ever knowing God's favour again.

Advent is a time for us to acknowledge that our situation is not dissimilar – that we too are in exile. It's a different kind of captivity; not geographic but *spiritual*.

It's also a time in the year when many families send and receive newsletters. You know how they go. They report how their eldest child plays six instruments and has gained 16 A-graded GCSEs. And their youngest child plays eight sports and has won eighteen competitions. They tell of their fabulous holidays, family weddings, and of their grandparents who are well into their nineties yet still go for their daily swim and take part in charity fun runs!

Such letters have their place - good news is always worth sharing. But I once heard someone say that he could not bear to read them because they made him feel miserable at having such an apparently ordinary family! And more recently I heard a young woman complain in similar terms about self-descriptions on social media – that they are often so full of success, and great experiences, that they made her feel like an underachiever. She was saying that, for all its benefits, social media allows people to hide their true selves beneath an airbrushed online persona.

The truth is that most of us don't live smooth and glossy lives. In fact, if we're honest, we experience plenty of brokenness. Much of this is inward, like living with disappointment - in ourselves, in others, even in God. We may use things like work and entertainment (both good in themselves) to numb the ache. But we find they provide no escape from that sense of inner brokenness.

For me this is one of the most compelling arguments in a post-rationalist culture for the existence of God: that all human beings appear to have a deep-seated awareness that all is not well within them and that they need to find help from beyond themselves.

And when human beings *do* find God, our Epistle reading suggests, they find a God not enraged and vengeful but a God of endless patience and forbearance. 'He is patient with you', Peter writes, 'not wanting anyone to perish' (2 Peter 3: 9, 15).

They also find a God with the *capacity*, and the *strength*, to provide the meaningful and lasting comfort they seek. So great is that strength, in fact, that 'every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low' (Isa 40.4).

True comfort, today's three scriptures seem to be telling us, can only come from the source of all grace and power. That grace and power are of such magnitude that the spiritual giant John the Baptist stood in awe of them. Although he was prepared to live the life of an ascetic hermit out in the desert, he was prepared also to admit 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (Mk 1.7).

Taken together, what can this morning's readings teach us about our 'Deeper into God' theme this Advent? I think it's that, despite our spiritual exile, God sees us as so *beloved*, and *precious*, and of *eternal value*, that he wishes to make himself real to us as a comforter who releases us from all our fears, and shortcomings, and inhibitions. And he does so by giving us the Holy Spirit, another name for whom, is *Paraclete*, or Comforter.

Someone told me a story this week about a caged eagle. It was brought to a nature reserve to release it into the wild. But when the cage door was opened, the eagle stayed on its perch. Here was a majestic bird full of strength and beauty looking straight out the door to freedom and yet it stayed put. Eventually, after a couple of hours, another eagle flew high overhead making its high-pitched flight call. At the sound of it, the caged eagle lifted its head and instantly flew out of the cage and soared up into the sky.

The person telling me this story said it was as if the eagle was not just in the cage but that the cage was in the eagle. And when it heard the call of the other eagle it was as if it remembered who it was – a mighty bird made to fly – and overcame the inhibitions that had been imposed upon it and then had imposed on itself.

I was reminded of this story when I heard a couple of days later a radio interview with the violinist Gaelynn Lea. She was born with brittle bone disease (*osteogenesis imperfecta*), which meant many of her bones broke during her delivery as a baby and were unable to properly heal. She's been in a wheelchair from the age of two and is severely stunted in her growth. But a teacher encouraged her to pursue a career in music after she gained full marks in a music listening test.

She could easily have dismissed the idea out of hand – like the caged eagle, aware of its limitations. But even though she's now fully grown, she's only around the same height as a violin. Yet she plays it magnificently, positioning it in a similar way to someone playing the cello. She has just started a concert tour of the country and is using it to draw attention to disability rights. When I heard her interviewed I thought: 'that's an uncaged bird!' She's a tangible example of something we all need spiritually.

We must never get so used to the limitations around us that we lose the longing to be free. Prayer, because it leads us deeper into the God of all patience and all comfort, reminds us who we are and rekindles the longing for God's freedom within us. It allows us to soar to heights far beyond our natural limits!

So let me end this second instalment in our series on prayer with prayer. I'd like to pray it for us here at St John's. Taken from an Advent carol, it's an invocation for Christ to come to us by his spirit as a comforter who banishes all darkness and fear:

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.

Amen.