

## **An Address by Belinda Speed-Andrews, 6 December 2020**

Are you sitting comfortably? OK, so this is not Jack-a-nory but I want to invite you all to sit comfortably, with both feet flat on the floor and your head in line with your spine. Shut your eyes and breathe in deeply hold your breath briefly and breathe out; breathe in and breathe out.....Listen to the words I am about to speak; you may not be a word person so what picture do you imagine as you listen? If you are a word person what are those words saying to you? What emotions are you feeling right now in this moment?

‘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.....See, the Lord 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 to his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.’ ‘The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not grow faint or weary; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint’

When I read the reading from Isaiah in preparation for this sermon I immediately saw in my imagination a long road, not winding, but straight, leading upwards and I imagined that when I got to the top there was just glory all around; there were hundreds of other people there too; but there was total silence, but not an intimidating silence; but it was the light, not dazzling, but just a glorious light, comforting with an over-whelming sense of peace, of coming home; I was home where I belonged. “Prepare the way of the Lord, makes his paths straight”.

I would like to place our reading from Isaiah this morning in context, because sometimes when we read sections of a book like Isaiah it can mean very little. The Israelites through centuries of disobedience and a breaking of their covenant relationship with God are in captivity in Babylon; they have lost everything; they have lost their temple, where for them God resides, they have lost their homeland and now they are living under the rule of a foreign power. In light of this, they are wondering whether there is any source of comfort left for them, a people stripped of self-defence and of soul as they mourned in a foreign land; vulnerable before their captors.

Isaiah is bringing words of hope and comfort to those discouraged by years of exile. There are no platitudes in this reading as is the way of the Old Testament about a quick solution to the pain and suffering of the people. In the Book of Job and Ecclesiastics there is no simple answer to suffering in fact the questions asked in these books of scripture, sharpened the truth and reality of suffering and the fact that we have strayed far from God's love; our reading this morning reminds the people that they are not innocent but that 'your iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins'.

What then for us? We hear these words spoken from Scripture every year at this time and I want to ask are we in danger of making them a part of the comfort that Christmas is; a time for good food and family celebrations; singing carols, warm log fires, and good old Christmas movies; have we lost the ability to yearn, to really get under the skin of a deep longing for the comfort that God offers us.

I want to perhaps be controversial this morning and suggest that with the offer of a vaccine are we in danger of looking past the events of this last year and really taking stock of where we are? Are we in danger of moving on to the fact that there is now a light at the end of the tunnel and life can get back to normal, whatever normal is?

I want to challenge each of us to think about what are we going to cry out this season? I know I feel over-whelmed by the depth of some people's current suffering and a feeling of a deep inability to do anything that will make a difference. For those who have lost loved ones to Covid, the vaccine means nothing. To those who have lost their jobs and are waiting for Universal credit to kick in are in debt with the DWSP from loans from the DWSP to tide them over till they get their first payment and then not only are they unemployed but they are now in debt as well. There are people still on furlough and businesses that have been a part of our High street for years and small individual businesses are closing left right and centre - for these people the vaccine means nothing. These people are like the Israelites in the desert, like those in exile who have lost hope of an end to their suffering and will wonder from where their help will come. And for some people they are just waiting to fall into the big black hole in front of them - and sadly some have succumbed.

What about the Church in all of this? We too are all wondering about our future - the shape of our life together, what our worship practices will be and the nature of our witness - as we experience a high degree of discomfort brought about by the pandemic and restrictions upon restrictions on how we interact with each - that in itself is an

exile for an embodied people; then the IISCA report and now the release of the Living in Love & Faith material which have highlighted the suffering of many many people in our church families across the globe.

In order to recognise the hope that God offers us we have to recognise our duplicity in all that is wrong with this world, only then can we begin to yearn as the Israelites yearn to return home and only then do we hear this offer of hope from God. And in hearing this offer of hope, what shall we cry? Because what we cry is not just for us but for all people and the message we want to cry to all those who are suffering in this present time, whether it is from loss of life, loss of job, loss of all that makes any sense or meaning, is the message Isaiah cries out in our reading today. “Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places made plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed”.

But it is not that easy is it? ‘Take a look at our own world, and see how preposterous the message we carry will sound. It does indeed seem that the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ has little power against those elements that seem to control our lives; money, power, consumerism, greed, hate, discrimination. Consumerism demands more of the worlds resources which threatens our environment. The conduct of war robs us of precious lives and international respect. Religious zealotry pits one image of God against another, leaving our human communities fractured and cynical. How then can we speak of a God who promises to become present in a way that ‘all people shall see it together’?

This though is what we as faithful people of God are being called to do. In the face of derision, and indifference, we are called to speak of this God whose fierce compassion and care for humanity, trumps all other gods who seem to reign in our lives.

Advent then is a time to hear these promises again and then to sit with them through this season. It’s also a time for our community to find our own voice, overcome our objections and speak words of comfort and assurance to anyone who feels separated or abandoned by God, that God will arrive and will come in gentle power.’

I go back the image I had at the beginning. This road that leads us home which God has widened and flattened is now open for us who believe to start walking that path through and with the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And as we walk the path let us ‘lift

up our voice with strength...lift it up, [and not] fear...[for God] will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather them in his arms, and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep'. Amen