

SERMON AT 11.00 AM MORNING PRAYER AT CHRIST CHURCH, TOTLAND BAY ON SUNDAY 10TH DECEMBER 2017 (2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT) BY JAMES COOK

Readings: Isaiah 40.1-11 and Mark 1.1-8.

Title: 'Listen Out for an Announcement!'

Aim: To encourage us to listen out and act upon God's announcement of Jesus.

When I made an announcement earlier today about clergy appointments in West Wight, how did you feel?

I imagine that most of us pricked up our ears, because we were hoping for such an announcement and we thought it would have significant impact upon our lives as church members.

In the discussions that will happen later, beginning with chats over coffee after the service, I expect we will share thoughts about the individuals concerned: what are they like, how will they find living in West Wight and what might be their message to us for the future?

We will be praying that our new ministers will be happy here and that each in their own way will bring us God's challenges and his blessings.

When I hear a prominent Christian personality speak on radio or television, or read what he or she has written in a newspaper, I have questions. I ask myself not only, "What is his or her opinion on such and such?" but "What might God be saying to me personally through this person? Is there a warning from God to heed, a comfort to receive, or a command to obey?"

We encounter in the Bible people who are described as 'prophets'. These are men and women whose principal responsibility is to listen out for what God has to say and then to share that message with those to whom they are sent. The messages that these prophets bring from God are first for people of their own time, but often they have relevance for us today.

Our first set reading for today was from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Looking at the time-span of the book and its content, many Biblical scholars believe that it is a collection of material emanating from more than one person called 'Isaiah': probably two, and possibly three. Whether or not there was more than one author does not detract from the book's enormous value, in enabling us to hear what God is saying to our generation.

In the first part of the Book of Isaiah, chapters 1-39, the Prophet pronounces God's judgement upon the nation of Israel, its neighbours and its enemies for their godless behaviour. They will suffer great distress as a punishment for their evil ways, although a remnant will be saved from destruction. God's people are here described in terms of a loved and nurtured vineyard.

Chapters 40 onwards of Isaiah bring something different: profound, poetic words of comfort to an exiled people. No doubt many here can testify to the comfort they have received, as if directly from God, from within the second half of Isaiah. In these chapters, 40-66, we meet a tender, loving God the Father and a suffering servant, Jesus his Son, the one on whom God's Spirit is laid.

From today's passage in chapter 40, I love especially verse eleven:

"He tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

Do you find comfort in these words, and in the window before us in which this image is portrayed?

The Old Testament prophets inspired their New Testament counterparts to declare God's judgement upon those who reject his love and to pronounce his blessings upon those who follow him.

Isaiah had foretold, in chapter 40 verse 3, that there would be a voice calling:

"In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."

Someone was to make an announcement about a major change that God would bring about – something that would turn the world upside down and have impact upon all their lives. God would smooth the rough places of human suffering and remove the mountains of cruelty and despair. Mark the New Testament writer sees John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, as the 'someone' who would make this announcement.

When we hear an announcement of a major change in church leadership, we should ask ourselves: "What things will change? How will these changes affect me? How must I change? Am I willing to be changed by God?"

Put another way, "Am I willing to prepare a way for the Lord God to come afresh into my life? What are the crooked paths in my attitudes and behaviour that need to be straightened out, so that I become more like the person that God wants me to be?"

Mark describes in the New Testament how John the Baptist speaks to the people of his day. Like the Old Testament prophets before him, John still speaks to us in our day. John preaches to them, and to us, about the need for baptism, repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism, the hallmark of a follower of Jesus, demonstrates that we cannot get right with God through our own efforts. We need our sins – all that we are and do that is wrong in God's eyes – washed away through faith in Jesus Christ his Son. We need repentance – a turning away from all that is godless in our lives, and we need God's forgiveness. We cannot continue to bear the burden of our sins, and only Jesus can lift that burden, because only he by his very nature is free from sin.

John the Baptist speaks with an authority grounded in his humility, his simple lifestyle and his personal integrity. He deems himself as lowly as a household slave. He says that he is not worthy even to stoop down and untie the sandals of Jesus. John scavenges for food in the desert and he wears the roughest of clothes. Later, we learn, John will pay for his life when he makes a stand for morality in public life.

May we pray for our new leaders and for ourselves that together we may be humble, unselfish and courageous in submitting to God's will and in bringing God's love to all who need it. Amen.