

Sermon for Carol Service 2020

Andrea Ward

"O tidings of comfort and joy,
comfort and joy!
O tidings of Comfort and joy!"

Such familiar words from our first carol this evening, "God rest you merry gentlemen" sung by our All Saints Christmas choir.

"Comfort and Joy" - you may or may not have noticed that this has been the Church of England's strapline for this year's Christmas publicity. A strapline carefully chosen, and so appropriate in light of this year and all that it has brought us.

A couple of weeks ago, my eye was drawn to the front cover of a magazine lying around in our kitchen. Last year's December edition of Waitrose's Food magazine. On it is a photo of a sumptuous Christmas pudding with the words, "Comfort & Joy." Well, let's face it, I think we're all in need of a bit of the comfort and joy of some jolly good feasting this Christmas! Let's enjoy tucking into our Christmas dinners!

We need an opportunity to celebrate. Because here we are in the depths of winter, and (albeit with a vaccine beginning to be rolled out) in the depths of a pandemic which has ravaged our nation and the world this year. The last 9 months have brought trouble and suffering at so many different levels:

Illness and death (and not just through Covid); the pain of not being able to see a loved one in their last hours in hospital; the sorrow of not being able to comfort one another as we would normally do in small, socially distanced funeral services; not being able to visit loved ones in Care homes; children and young people unable to receive a normal education; people losing their jobs and incomes; others exhausted through work-overload; people isolated for weeks and months in their homes; the fatigue and anxiety of dealing with constant change; no touching, no singing, no hugging.....the list is enormous. And so has been the impact on us all.

"The people walking in darkness...living in the land of the shadow of death..." - those words from our Isaiah reading probably ring more true collectively this Christmas than we can remember for many a Christmas gone by.

As our Isaiah reading suggests, the people of his day, the Israelites, were living through very dark times; the dark days of exile, cut off from their homeland, with the small comfort of memories of good times in the past, and the yearning for better times to come. And it was into their darkness that Isaiah and other prophets started to speak words of hope and promise from Yahweh, their God. God had seen and heard their pain, and He reached out with compassion to his suffering people:

"Comfort, comfort my people says your God" (Isaiah 40:1)

"Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains. For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones" (Isaiah 49:13)

God comforted his people with the good news that better times were coming, with beautiful pictures of the desert and the parched land rejoicing and bursting into bloom; "the wilderness will rejoice greatly and shout for joy." (Isaiah 35:1-2)

Better times had eventually come, though not like the previous glory days. And the Prince of Peace, promised to reign on David's throne with justice and righteousness, the wonderful Counsellor promised by Isaiah? Well, the long wait for him carried on and on. And six centuries later, people were still waiting.

They too were living in dark times, under the oppressive occupation of the Romans. There wasn't much comfort or joy in their lives, at least not in their daily circumstances.

Except that something was happening, there were stirrings. Stories of a priest meeting with an angel in the temple and his elderly wife becoming pregnant. Stories of how when the priest's son, John, was born, his mute father Zechariah had burst into praise, echoing Isaiah's words of hope, singing of "the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." Stories of a young virgin being visited by an angel and miraculously conceiving; of her partner being told in a dream that her child would save the people from their sins and would be called Immanuel, God with us. Was this the Prince of Peace, the Mighty One they had been waiting and waiting for through those long, dark years?

Within the troubles and struggles of occupation, hope and joy were in the air. God was coming to comfort his people.

And for all those who met with the baby who was born to the virgin Mary in Bethlehem, what comfort and indescribable joy they experienced. Mary sang "My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour". The angel announced to the shepherds, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people". The shepherds glorified and praised God for all the things they had seen and heard. The Magi, when they saw the star stop over the place where the child was, were overjoyed. The child that Isaiah had prophesied about did not disappoint, but caused angels to sing, burly shepherds to race around town with their news, and rich rulers to fall to their knees in wonder and awe as they met with Immanuel. God with us. God come from heaven come to live among us.

God who loved the world, loved you and me so much that he sent his one and only Son Jesus, to share in all our humanness - including our sufferings and troubles, our vulnerability and frailty.

The Greek word in the bible for comfort is "paraklesis", which literally means "to come alongside". In coming into our world in Jesus, that's exactly what God has done. He has come alongside us. Jesus, the baby born to be our Saviour and Counsellor, wants each of us know that He is Emmanuel, God with us, God in us, our daily Comforter, our Helper, alongside us at all times. And Jesus, the Wonderful Counsellor, promised that when he left earth he wouldn't leave us alone as orphans, but would give us another Helper to live within us: the Holy Spirit. And what's one of the Greek words for the Holy Spirit? Paraklete: the Comforter.

In this time of our trouble and suffering, we have the hope and comfort that with a vaccine the shadow that the virus has cast over our life in so many different ways, is going to lift and there are better times ahead. What comfort this gift offers us. But this is just a picture of the immeasurably greater comfort which we can find and know in the gift of God's Son, Jesus, whose birth we celebrate in this season.

We have the comfort of a vaccine that will save us from this disease and will set us free to live our lives again. The virus that has hung over us with all its threats will no longer have the power to frighten, to keep us apart, to keep us locked up with its sentence of death. We will be set free to live our lives again. The joy of living more fully will gradually return, the colour will come back into the parched desert.

But there is an immeasurably greater and deeper joy, the promise of life in all its fullness to be found in Jesus, born in Bethlehem. For Jesus has conquered the ultimate darkness of death, through overcoming the power of the grave and rising again. Jesus has taken the sting out of death and set us free from the fear that death once had over us.

Jesus has saved us from our sin and the power that Satan once had over us, setting us free to live in total confidence in life with God forever, whatever *this* life may bring. Come out! He says to all who have been captives. Be free! He says to all who have been living in darkness.

God's Son, the child born of a human mother in Bethlehem, came to give everyone who would receive him and believe in him, the right to become a child of God, born of God, as John's gospel tells us. To know the joy of a relationship with our Heavenly Father which can never be taken from us. So, if you haven't already received Him, I urge you to put your belief in Jesus your Saviour, ask Him to forgive you your sin and to fill you with His Holy Spirit, the one who will help you follow Jesus and will be your Comforter. Emmanuel, God with us, alongside us.

And for those who already know the Comfort and Joy of Emmanuel, God with us, God alongside us - may we, like the angels and the shepherds, go out and share our good news with our family, our friends, our neighbours this Christmas:

"God rest you merry, gentlemen

Let nothing you dismay,

For Jesus Christ our Saviour

Was born upon this day,

To save us all from Satan's power

When we were gone astray

O tidings of comfort and joy,

comfort and joy!

O tidings of Comfort and joy!"