

Advent 2

The second Sunday in Advent was, until recently, known as “Bible Sunday”. This was taken from the Collect for this Sunday in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

“Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.”

With this prayer in mind, we look this week at the Old Testament reading: Isaiah chapter 40, verses 1 – 11. We can approach this reading (and others in the Prophets of the Old Testament) in three ways.

- 1) What did it mean for the people at the time it was written?
- 2) What did it mean for the people at the time of the birth of the Lord Jesus?
- 3) What does it mean for us now, and in the future?

If all Holy Scripture is written for our learning, then all three ways of reading it should apply.

- 1) What did it mean for the people at the time it was written?

The time of writing was probably at the beginning or during the reign of Manasseh (696 – 641 B.C.), the apostate king of Judah. It was a time of moral breakdown and idolatry – see 2 Kings 21, verse 16. His son king Amon was no better – see 2 Kings 21, verses 19 – 24. During these dark times when judgement and exile was certain 2 Kings 23, verses 26 – 27, Isaiah looks forward to a time when the Lord God will lead His people back home. This was partially fulfilled at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah as some of the exiles returned to Jerusalem between 538 and 430 B.C.

- 2) What did it mean for the people at the time of the birth of the Lord Jesus?

Matthew 3, verse 3 and Mark 1, verse 3 both use a paraphrase of Isaiah 40, verse 3 to describe the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke in chapter 3, verse 4 – 6 uses an extended version of the same text. The prophecy of Isaiah, written some 700 years before, was regarded as being fulfilled by John’s ministry.

Isaiah was not the only one who foretold the ministry of John the Baptist. Mark’s Gospel chapter 1, verse 2 uses a quote from the prophet Malachi 3, verse 1. John the Baptist was recognised as the great fore-runner of the Lord Himself, a second Elijah described as such by the Lord Jesus – see Matthew 17, verses 10 – 13.

- 3) What does it mean for us now, and in the future?

There are promises in the original passage from Isaiah 40, which have not yet been fulfilled! Notably verse 5, which speaks of a world wide revelation of the glory of the Lord God. Compare this with last week’s reading from Mark 13, verse 26 and Daniel 7 verses 13 – 14. There is another and greater fulfilment yet to come at the end of time, when the Great Shepherd will gather His people, feed, love and care for them through all eternity – Isaiah 40, verse 11.

If we recognise John the Baptist as Elijah who was to come, it would seem that the task of “*preparing the way of the Lord*” now resides with the followers of the Lord Jesus: with the “*royal priesthood*” (1 Peter 2, verse 9 and 2 Corinthians 5, verse 19).

Isaiah 40, verses 6 – 8 give a very gloomy message on a first reading! People are just like grass! Very fragile and only here for a short time. As those preparing for the coming of the Lord in glory, our task is set out in verses 3 – 4. Preparing His way, straightening out our lives. Lifting us and those with whom we have contact from the gloom and despair of the valley bottom. Removing the mountains and hills of sin. Smoothing out the rough edges of our characters! In all these things we are “*preparing the way of the Lord*”.

May the Holy Spirit guide, strengthen and sustain us as we look and work for the coming of the Lord in Glory to this desperately needy world!