



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

2nd Sunday of Advent Year B

Joyful messengers

Readings: Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11; Ps 84, 2 Peter 3: 8-14, Mark 1: 1-8

We owe a great cultural and religious debt to Charles Jennens, an 18th century landowner and friend of George Frederick Handel, for it was Jenner who provided the master musician with the libretto of the Messiah, a meditation crafted from Holy Scripture. His work ensured that this text from Isaiah became one of the best known passages in the Bible, though he himself was not particularly enamoured of Handel's setting. (Some of it was not worthy of Handel. None of it was worthy of Christ. History has judged rather differently.)

Isaiah writes out of the great exile. He encapsulates the longing for return to Jerusalem, the desire for the punishment for sin to end and for the people to become, once more, the people of God and rebuild the Temple of the Presence on the Holy Mountain.

I am, as a Cornishman, always a bit ambivalent about the text here. Rather like St. John's vision in Revelation where, in Heaven, there 'is no more sea', I find it a bit disorientating.

If the valleys are filled in and the mountains and hills made low, every cliff becomes a plain and the winding tracks straightened then Heaven will be like Norfolk and there are some things I simply cannot believe. Fortunately we have here a metaphor for the road home rather than a geographical exactitude.

The hearts of the faithful long always and everywhere for the road home to the Heavenly City to be re-opened. Our hearts long for the exile to be ended. We are tired of the burden of sin and mortality. We hope for the liberation that only the Sinless and Eternal One can bring.

Advent reminds us of our exiled state, far from Eden. It recalls us to the deepest longings of our heart, to the original intentions of God that we should, made in His image, dwell with Him in eternity and love.

That quest for the road home led Abraham out from the comfort of Haran to watch the desert skies, to walk out of burning cities, to stand on the mountaintop prepared to make the supreme sacrifice.

That quest led the prophets to endure persecution, flight and death to proclaim the truth of God.

That quest led Mary to endure rejection, exile, obscurity and heartrending sorrow.

Deep in the heart of everyman is that homing instinct, however far he may have strayed and however set his mind has become against his intended destiny.

The music of Handel merely insinuates that truth into the place where it will resonate with the depth of the human psyche. We are all exiles in a strange land. Here is no abiding city. Here is no place of stay.

We may never move from Bodmin but we are travellers of the pilgrim way no less than Abraham and, for good or ill, Bodmin is not our eternal destiny.

What the great Isaian text reminds us that nothing is to stand in the way of the coming of the Lord Our God. Nothing must be allowed to impede His glorious return to the capital city of our hearts. We are not citizens of a republic but subjects of the King of Kings and all things will be subject to His just and merciful rule. When we look forward to the end time we see the triumphal train of the Lord of Hosts preceding Him. All things will be under His power. The final triumph of righteousness, holiness and the goodness that belongs alone to God will have the victory.

This is why, when the priest, in the Mass, sings the *Sursum Corda* ('lift up your hearts'), we respond 'We lift them up to the Lord'. Actually the original text is clearer 'Habemus ad Dominum' – We have lifted them to the Lord.

We are ready to celebrate – our hearts are on high with Hope and longing that has become fervent expectation. That's how excited we should be at Mass, tingling with anticipation for the Descent of the Dove that will presence the Messiah in the offerings of the altar and which, very shortly we will receive on our tongues, tongues that will continue to sing His praise and go out to proclaim Him to the world.

That is to be our task. We are to be the messengers of the coming of the King. There must be no impediment in our hearts that stands in His way and we are to go out to proclaim the good news of His coming. We are to be 'joyful messengers', please note. We are to 'fearless' in proclaiming the Real Presence of God.

If people want to know what He is like we tell them He is both King of Kings and Lord of Lords and upon their response to Him depends their eternal destiny. But we are also to show them that He is the Good Shepherd, feeding His flock and gathering His lambs in His arms.

Nothing can stand in the way of His return or stop His triumph.

Our task is to be messengers of that great news to all who will listen and those who will not. Our next spiritual exercise is to share this good news simply with one other person outside the Faith before Christmas. You may have the opportunity to explain to a friend why you come to Mass. You may want to write a letter to a lapsed son or daughter about your constant prayers for their return. There will be many opportunities.

Whenever we take them, God work is done in two ways. We have shared our heart for Jesus and every time we do that He strengthens our faith.

Mission is always a win-win bet.

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