Isaiah 40: 1-11; Mk 1: 1-8

(and, Ps: 85: 1-2, 8-13 *or* 8 – end; 2 Pet 3: 8-15a)

This is the week of Advent where we especially reflect on the prophets. And in our first reading we see the prophet at work, not so much foretelling about the future, but rather identifying deeper truths about the situation of the people of Israel and their relationship with God. Prophets often had uncomfortable and lonely roles, speaking truths no one wanted to hear. In this instance, however, his challenge and insights were prefaced by words of comfort. We read: ‘Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God’, he then goes on:

*A voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground made level, and the rough places a plain.’*

There are a number of images that shoot through my mind when I hear these familiar words of Isaiah, which are then quoted in part by Mark.

A number of you will be familiar with driving north of Cambridge on the A14. You will remember it as a place of queues and delays, then of months of roadworks as it was redeveloped, and now a delight since it was finished a year or so ago. If you were on it during its development you will, perhaps, have been struck by the scale and complexity of the undertaking, the obstacles to be overcome, and the high degree of organisation required to bring the right elements together in a timely way, day after day, in order to bring the new road into existence.

More geographically appropriate to the writer of Isaiah, I am also reminded of some of T.E. Lawrence’s descriptions in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, graphically detailing his long and arduous journeys in the First World War with the Arab Revolt, across the Arabian Peninsula and north across the Middle East up to Damascus. Once off any main track, travel (which for him was by camel) was very difficult and uncertain. The landscape was largely uncharted, arid and featureless, with mountainous ridges and impassable gorges; water was rare and unreliable. Even marked tracks were hard going in that terrain.

A very different and contemporary example of levelling and straightening is the production of a vaccine for coronavirus. How extraordinary it has been to see the speed, cooperation and hurdles overcome. Something for which we, and indeed people of all faiths, have been praying, and will deliver for the common good.

But the preacher/prophet in Isaiah, talking about straightening out highways, is neither interested in making an expedition across the desert, nor building a road, nor the science, commerce and industry of pharmaceuticals. His words are more theological and pastoral. He is speaking to the people of Israel in exile who long to return to their homeland. They correlate their exile with their former waywardness from God and are in distress. The opening verses of the reading and the last verse are a reassurance from God that He wishes them to be fully reconciled to Him: ‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God’; and at the end of our reading, ‘he will gather the lambs into his arms, and carry them to his bosom’.

The wilderness to which Isaiah refers typically stands for the place where humankind encounters God. It is in the wilderness, with everything stripped away, no distractions and an awareness of our vulnerability, we come face to face with ourselves: no pretence, no hiding and a sense of our dependency and ultimate frailty. In later verses we read: ‘All people are grass…the grass withers, the flower fades…’ It is in this place, this place of truth about us, that we are most accessible to God our Father who offers comfort and embrace.

The prophet would have us be in that place. Moreover he then speaks about making ‘a highway for our God’. The term ‘way’ is used throughout the Bible in a moral and religious sense, to refer to a person’s conduct or character, or the moral order established by God. The encounter with God then requires of us an alignment with His character and purposes. We are to work on eliminating the peaks and troughs, and the twists and turns distorting and dislodging our engagement with God and impeding our journey in faith at a personal level. Waywardness from God and his ways is what I think of as ‘sin’.

We are also to challenge ourselves as to how far and how well we pursue these same purposes in our relationships and in all that we do, or probably more particularly fail to do, beyond what immediately impinges upon us. Throughout the Bible, and particularly in the words of prophets, God’s purposes for humankind and the world in respect of righteousness and justice and made very clear and prominent. The examples given are often not about avoiding doing the wrong thing, but about positive action needed to ensure the wellbeing of those in a difficult situation, for example those who are poor or who are refugees. Whilst we may do well in avoiding doing the wrong thing, it is pretty hard to work out where to begin and end with trying to make a positive contribution to the world around us, whether locally or more widely. We all bring different skills and capacity - which change over time. Alongside anything altruistic we may aim to do, we also have personal responsibilities to take into account as well. Weighing all this up is difficult, and in our meeting with God, in the quietness, we have to find our own way forward, and keep doing so.

It is here, though, that I would like to bring you back to where I started, as the development of a straight and level highway is for each of us a lifetime project. Repentance, or pointing in the right direction, or getting on the right road, as spoken about in our Gospel reading, is not an end but a beginning. What lies ahead is the work of dealing with humps in the way, unexpected ditches, twists and turns – sometimes going up dead ends, and we need something of an A14 project mindset to help us along. We need a clear vision of our goal, we need constant reference to foundation documents, we need supportive colleagues, we need to listen to them and offer support where we can, we need to pick ourselves up after problems and get back on track, and we need to focus on how we are doing rather than comparing ourselves with others.

The good news is that we have the grace of God and Jesus’ promise of the guidance of His Holy Spirit. The further good news, which I mentioned near the beginning, is that it is God’s intention to draw everyone to Himself. In the epistle reading for today from the second letter of Peter we find these words:

*But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.*

So, whilst at times during Advent we are reminded that we need to remain alert and not be caught out, as it were, there is this strong sense through the Bible that God’s intention is to draw all people to himself and that he is patient as we journey on in faith.

May we be strengthened on that journey, both individually and together as a church, by his grace, through our communion this morning.

Amen