Isaiah 35v 1ff.2016

It was a cold cold grey day as I drove down our youngest daughter home from the station earlier this week. As I looked ahead along the tarmac expanse, a dull mist hung over the barren earth. Greyness overshadowed us and seemed to press down from the sky to the earth, until it disappeared into the ground. There seemed to be no division between earth and sky, for all alike were grey and barren. No sunlight penetrated this armour of grey . It was as if nature itself had taken on the shallow breathing, the inactivity and the greyness of a dying man.

As people who live in the northern hemisphere, we should by now have grown used to such things. But it is not just the weather that is giving rise to a niggling anxiety in the hearts and minds of many. The daily news programmes that we see and hear, tell us of problems that appear to be insoluble. Individuals, groups and nations seem to be driven by a self interest that has given birth to envy, suspicion, hatred, exploitation, mindless impulses and destruction. Old certainties and expectations seem to be built upon sand.

This is not a modern phenomenon. We find the greatest men and women of God confronting the grey dying wilderness and find themselves alone. They scour the horizon and they see the sky pressing down the earth and an earth that is barren. It can seem that the promises that God gives to us, that he will be beside us are not to be trusted. He seems indifferent and afar. That was certainly how the people of God, the Israelites felt at the end of the 6th century. And you can scarcely blame them. The vast majority of the people had been driven from their home in Jerusalem and forced marched hundreds of miles through modern day Syria and Iraq to Babylon, near to modern day Baghdad. They had only what they could carry and they were in a foreign land, where they were mocked and their faith ridiculed. Jerusalem and their former life was but a distant dream. Every morning they woke up to the harsh reality of life in an alien culture.

But God had not forgotten these people. He knew that they needed one thing above all else if they were to survive this ordeal. They needed hope. And so the prophet Isaiah was given a vision of their future. This was our first bible reading this morning. If you would like to take a glance at it. You will notice it is not like a route planner. It doesn’t say in 60 years time, turn left past the bakers and then go along the A53 to Mosul. After 500 kilometres turn left and so on. Route planners get you there, but they don’t inspire you at all. We need what we see here- a piece of poetry. A people need to say, I have a dream.

It is a dream of a wilderness. It is a dream of a desert, where the heat does not suck you dry. Of a land where the suns beats the life out of you. It is a desert that receives rain, so that the plants burst into life and bloom. And the whole of creation, plants, insects and eagles, birds and beast and men and women rejoice and sing. And why? For the power and the presence of God cannot be doubted.

There will be no doubting that the Lord has come for the wilderness will be transformed into a forest. It will be like the forest of Lebanon with their mighty cedars. And all those whose hands are drooping and who are faint-hearted will find new hope and new heart. For then they will see the transformation of humanity. Those who are blind shall see and the deaf shall hear. The lame shall leap and the dumb shall shout aloud. And not only shall humanity rejoice, but the whole of creation will burst into a surge of green growth, where formally there was none. But the central feature of this landscape will be a highway, - the way of holiness. At first the prophet does not indicate where it will lead,.He wants to prepare gradually the idea of the pilgrims returning home along this highway and travelling towards Zion. No impure person, no one excluded from Temple, whether Jew or non-Jew may use this road. And no fool who has perverse views about the actions of God may use it. These restrictions make clear the ultimate destination. But first he must reassure the pilgrims that the lush vegetation will not harbour lions or any other dangerous animal. And then he declares their destination. It is Zion the gathering place for the people of God.

In this Advent time we need a reminder that God can be trusted. He will transform the world. This will take place at the second coming of Christ. The early Christians expected this to be something that would happen anytime soon

They believed that so firmly that, when it didn’t happen, they couldn’t stop the doubts from showing. St Peter in his second letter deals with this with characteristic robustness: ‘In the last days there will come men who will pour cynical scorn on the faith, and who know no law but their own desires. “What has happened to his promised coming?” they will demand. “Already a generation has passed to its rest, and the situation remains exactly as it has always been since the world was created.” Such men have chosen to shut their eyes to the fact that long ago the heavens existed, and an earth was formed out of water and through water by the Word of God ... my dear friends, there is one fact you must never forget. One day to the Lord is the same as a thousand years, and a thousand years are the same as one day. It is not as though the Lord is slow to fulfil his promise … He is being patient with you, because he does not want any of you to be lost.’

So is St Peter telling us that we have no need to worry, and that there is plenty of time? By no means. He goes on: ‘The day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Or as James in our Epistle says , see the judge is standing at the doors.

The reason why early Christians were so sure that Christ would come seated on the clouds of heaven and clothed in divine glory – ‘Lo, he comes with clouds descending’ – was precisely because they had experienced  the resurrection. They had known Jesus in his earthly life. They had witnessed his crucifixion and death. They had encountered him risen and then ascended and then in the power of his Spirit sent upon them on the first Whitsunday, at Pentecost. And in Jewish belief the resurrection of the dead was the sign of the end of time when God would act to replace this present wicked world with a new one, his own Kingdom, in which his justice and righteousness would be supreme.

 But look more closely, and you discover that Jesus himself did not predict an imminent end of the world and his own Second Coming. Rather, he urged people to live as though the world might end at any moment and God come in power and great glory.

And this is what Advent is really all about, however embarrassing it may seem. It would be so much simpler to treat Advent as just a preparation for Christmas, but that is not what the Bible says. Rather, we are told time and time again to be awake and alert, as Peter Nicolai puts it in his superb hymn: ‘Sleepers, wake! The watch-cry pealeth, while slumber deep each eyelid sealeth: awake, Jerusalem, awake!’ But what this is not is a call for us to be looking for a God who is absent now and who will return again at some point in the future. No God is here and now and at work amongst us. Yet much of his work is not at all clear to us. Let me give you a little example of what I mean. When we got home from the station, Rebecca said to me. I must go in and get my camera . “What for? Said idiot Father. “Can’t you see, the trees. At that I turned to the bush next to the car. Now for the last 3 months, I have been looking at this bush and thinking it needs pruning. But I have not looked at it. It was covered in frost and then ends of each twig, were covered in a cluster of what looked liked stars. Delicate, shimmering beauty, which had been there the whole time. So Advent is a time to wake up and use our eyes. To hear the crying baby and not to forget its gurgle, the delicate hands and the trusting eyes. To see the crinkled old man with an obstinate manner and see his experience and smile. God is here already, god is working his purposes out as year succeeds to year. God is working his purpose out and the time is drawing near. Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be. When the earth will be full of the glory of God and the waters cover the sea. God has come and will come and break into our world.

We need to be able to respond to the breaking-in of that Kingdom with energy and hope, born of trust in him who raised Jesus from the dead. This is what the reformed pastor Richard Baxter meant in the 17th century when he said that he ‘preached as never sure to preach again; as a dying man to dying men.’ There is an urgency about the Gospel, not because the end of the world is going to happen tomorrow but because we are meant to live as though it were.