Isaiah 62:6-12

Christmas Eve 2017. It is the best of times, it is the worst of times, it is a season of Light, but for some it is a season of darkness, a winter of despair, or is it a spring of hope, it is an age of unprecedented progress, it is the age of foolishness, we have everything before us, we have nothing before us, we are all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, Christmas brings an intensity of emotions and impressions and experiences that range from awesome to awful.

 For a few days we can escape the bigger world hopefully. But even the simple task of last minute shopping becomes what my eldest daughter described as like the outbreak of war. Tesco`s supermarket in Maidstone, Kent was attacked by an army of shoppers who take off with every single frozen pea and every piece of stilton and don`t even think of meringue bases for your pudding. They went long ago.If the preparation has not worn you to a frazzle, what about the friends and relatives. Aunt Gladys or Onkel Dieter will be there on boxing day. Isn`t it amazing how little things and old wounds grind us down at this time of year. But, for others, this Christmas will be a time of much greater stress and emptiness. Death, depression ,divorce, debts, discrimination, disabilities and disease and a whole host of other destroyers do not take a winter break. Just the opposite, the Christmas season only serves to intensify them. And even the heart of the Christmas message of hope, joy and love seems to highlight that over the hills of Wiesbaden, there is no angelic choir but a deafening silence. God`s silence.

 That is the theme of the first reading we heard this evening. It is an extract from the book of Isaiah. It is written after the dreadful events that happened in the Middle East some 2.600 years ago. A foreign army had invaded the state of Judah, destroyed the capital city and carried off into exile most of the survivors. One commentary on these verses (Claus Westerman Isaiah p378) writes that crops, with pain staking hard labour won from the fields and vineyards had to be handed over. Thus there was no more joy in work, and there began to be a constant shortage of things, and depressing sorry times.” But worse of all, was the silence of God.

On Monday evening I took the dog out for a walk. We went north of the village up the hill. A layer of white snow covered the fields like a blanket and the dog was busy trying to finds field mice. That left me time to think about this sermon. I was quite alone, but there was a constant noise in my ear. I was less than two kilometres away from the A61- a major north south motorway through Germany. The wind was coming in my direction, so this whining, rumbling noise oscillated up the hill from the valley below. I could not escape our modern industrialised world, it would give me no quiet and no rest. But then my four-legged companion stopped sniffing and stood alert listening. She can hear at lest 7 times better than I . But then I heard a different rhyme and other sounds. It was no human voice, nor that of a machine. It was coming from the sky, but there was low cloud and visibility was poor. At first I could not recognize it and then my memory took me back forty five years to the shores of the Irish Sea. There, every time the tide turned came the squadrons of Canadian geese. This time, it was some other kind of goose, but they were geese. And that reminded me of a saying of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who compared God’s voice to that of the sparrow on the rooftops of the town. So easily drowned out, by the rush and bustle of daily life. God`s voice is rarely heard in our society, it drowned out by louder more strident voices. But it is there, to be found.

 Isaiah could only hope for God’s voice to break into the world. His advice to his listeners the Jews was to pester god with prayers. He says, “You who remind the Lord take no rest and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and established it renowned throughout the world.” (vs6-7) In otherwords, they are to pray for God’s intervention in the world, for salvation. Now my colleague and our rector preached an excellent sermon on this theme last Sunday. I missed it, but like me you can find it on our web site under formation and then sermons. He said Isaiah`s idea of salvation would begin with God “ rebuilding Jerusalem, (then) recreating a kingdom in which God is the judge, the ruler, and the king (Isaiah 33) and which will be known among the nations as symbol of righteousness and a blessing to the world.”

Isaiah never saw any of this. During the next 500 years, the situation for the Jewish people got a lot worse.There were only a few significant signs of hope, such as the rebuilding of the temple. But there was little sign of the coming of God’s kingdom- a kingdom with Jerusalem as its focal point. The result was a society prepared to go to any lengths to try to force God to intervene. Obviously they continued to pray, but new movements and new ideas, a new fundamentalism and fanaticism displayed their impatience with God. But then, when God did intervene it was in a way that Isaiah could scarcely have imagined. Yes, there was a birth, but not in a palace. There was an announcement of his birth, but it was to a small group of shepherds. They were a bit like people who work for Hermes and DPA delivering parcels:-people with a really important job, but not highly rated. It was the sheep who were important.,not the shepherds were not only poor, but at the bottom of the pile. So God chooses to reveal his coming, his presence ,to underrated, poor and overworked people. So you can see from this brief overview of God’s way of working, it is never what we expect, it doesn’t always come when we want it to happen and where we want it to happen

 When hardship affects most people in the Middle East, and they look for God to end his silence and to intervene, they say Inshallah, It is the will of Allah.. It is often followed by an acceptance of the world as it is- a surrender to fate. But simply praying is not the only suggestion that Isaiah makes.He says go a build up the highway Now Isaiah is not calling us to join the building industry- although certain building sites in Germany, such as the Schiersteiner Brücke or Berlin Airport or the Stuttgart 21 railway- project could do with

Some divine help. But the debate about these projects highlights something important: they are fiercely discussed because they are difficult and costly to build and because they are vital for a modern society to function. So what Isaiah is calling us Christians to do is to remove the stones, to remove the obstacles and to build ways that bring hope and change to a world in need. And by his life, death and resurrection the message is the same. God wants us each person here this evening to join with Jesus in bringing change to this broken world. You may say, your daft. You’re right there, But I am not as daft as I look. And I am dead right on this one. Ever since the fall of man, God has been calling all sorts and conditions of men and women to do incredible things. It could be something mega-like forgiving your idiot brother or something a bit easier like ringing a member of the congregation you have not seen for a while. It could be something fascinating like the job of an Indian Christian, I met on the train last month. She accredits the FSC. That means she works for a small firm in Bonn, lives in India, but goes round the world checking on companies to stop corruption. An interesting but demanding job. Not every job is like that, some are dead boring. They need doing too.

 What is awesome, is that God gives us the ability to do these tasks. God is no longer silent and distant. He gives us strength and our power through our knowledge of God’s love in Jesus and the gift of his Holy Spirit. We are called to live in communities that “should serve as an inspiration and encouragement to cooperate in God’s plan for the salvation of all.” (C Easthill”)

So I wish you a Happy Christmas and an astonishing and awesome New Year.