

**ADVENT 2017 (2)**  
 St Mary's Pro-Cathedral  
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### Programme

- Welcome to Advent 2, 2018
- Context of writing
- Reading poetic texts
- Back to Second Isaiah
- Pointers for prayer
- Prayer

### Advent 2

- “John the Baptist stood in the tradition of Isaiah’s vision of God’s kingdom, and he urges us to hold fast to an active and prophetic religion. That means promoting the practice of faith in all spheres of our life so that the light can break into the darkness and we can flourish as God’s creatures. A faith which fails to shape our immediate world is essentially idle; a faith without action is worth nothing. Just like John it is our vocation as individuals and as the Church to witness to Christ.”
- “A good Advent” from A Good Year, Mark Oakley (ed.), pp. 1-18.

Advent Readings					Themes
Advent 1	Is 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8	Ps 80 (79)	1 Cor 1:3-9	Mk 13:33-37	End of Time
<b>Advent 2</b>	<b>Is 40:1-5, 9-11</b>	<b>Ps 85 (84)</b>	<b>2 Pet 3:8-14</b>	<b>Mk 1:1-8</b>	<b>John the Baptist</b>
Advent 3	Is 61:1-2, 10-11	Magnificat	1 Thess 5:16-24	Jn 1:6-8, 19-28	John the Baptist
Advent 4	2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16	Ps 89 (88)	Rom 16:25-27	Lk 1:26-38	Mary

- Isaiah 1-39 — Uzziah, Ahaz and Hezekiah, in the Assyrian period
- Isaiah 40-55 — Cyrus, in the Babylonian period
- Isaiah 56-66 — in the Persian period, after the Exile
- Of course things are not so simple!

### Context of writing

- Isaiah 40-55
- Cyrus of Persia is mentioned in Isa 44:28–45:1; 45:13
- A message of consolation and hope
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- Many of the Wisdom Books
- Ezra and Nehemiah
- Possibly Jonah
- The Pentateuch came into its final form

Isa 45:1 This is what the LORD says to his chosen one,  
 to Cyrus, whose right hand I hold  
 in order to subdue nations before him,  
 and disarm kings,

to open doors before him,  
 so gates remain unclosed:  
 2 "I will go before you  
 and level mountains.  
 Bronze doors I will shatter  
 and iron bars I will hack through.  
 3 I will give you hidden treasures,  
 riches stashed away in secret places,  
 so you may recognise that I am the LORD,  
 the one who calls you by name, the God of Israel.

### Reading poetry (again!)

- You own experience
- In the bible:
  - "twin lines"
  - images and metaphors
  - kind of writing

Isa. 42:5 This is what the true God, the LORD, says—  
 the one who created the sky and stretched it out,  
 the one who fashioned the earth and everything that lives on it,  
 the one who gives breath to the people on it,  
 and life to those who live on it:  
 6 "I, the LORD, officially commission you;  
 I take hold of your hand.  
 I protect you and make you a covenant mediator for people,  
 and a light to the nations,  
 7 to open blind eyes,  
 to release prisoners from dungeons,  
 those who live in darkness from prisons.  
 8 I am the LORD! That is my name!  
 I will not share my glory with anyone else,  
 or the praise due me with idols.

- As noted regularly, the book of Isaiah seems to have been produced in three distinct phases.
  - Our reading today opens the section (chs. 40-55) proclaimed and written down during the Babylonian Exile (587-539 bc).
  - That exile was experienced and remembered as the greatest calamity to fall upon the people of Israel.
  - The tragedy triggered an intense questioning and eventually a massive renewal of faith at all levels.
  - So much is this the case that it is often said they went out Israelites and came back Jews. This is not only because only one of the twelve tribes seems to have survived—the Judeans / the Jews—but because in Exile they took up the distinctive marks of Judaism as we know it up to today.
  - These include synagogue, the dietary laws, Sabbath observance, and, perhaps, moving circumcision from puberty to birth.
- **40:1–11: Yahweh Speaks Good News to Israel**
  - 40:12–31: Strength for an Exhausted People
  - 41:1–42:9: Judgment in Favour of Israel
  - 42:10–43:8: The Divine Warrior Removes the Obstacles to His People's Return
  - 43:9–44:5: Israel Raised Up to Be a Witness to Yahweh
  - 44:6–23: Israel, a Witness to Their Maker
  - 44:24–45:13: Yahweh Appoints Cyrus King

- 45:14–25: Yahweh Will Not Leave Zion in Ruins
  - 46: Yahweh Carries His People to His City
  - 47: The Humbling and Destruction of Dame Babylon
  - 48: Exhortation to Be Open to the Prophet's Interpreting Word
  - 49: The Servant Performs His Task in the Sight of the Nations
  - 50:1–51:8: The Light That Follows Punishing Darkness
  - 51:9–52:12: A Prayer That Yahweh Destroy the Foe and Bring His People to Zion
  - 52:13–53:12: The Many Confess That Yahweh Upholds His Servant
  - 54: Zion, the Secure City of Yahweh
  - 55: Come into the Life-giving Presence of Yahweh!
- This passage is a very fine example of biblical poetry. Almost every two lines illustrate poetic parallelism.
  - You might notice that the second line is not simply a repetition in other words but actually brings forward the thought. Robert Alter speaks of the “uneasy synonymity” of biblical poetry. For example:
    - ...that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.
    - Three systems of metaphors are intertwined: forensic (sin and punishment, reward and recompense), construction (roads and highways, hills and mountains), pastoral (shepherding).
    - The language of shepherding echoes at the end words of compassion and tenderness at the start.

### Isaiah 40:1-11

**Isa 40:1** “Comfort, comfort my people,”  
says your God.

**2** “Speak kindly to Jerusalem, and tell her  
that her time of warfare is over,  
that her punishment is completed.  
For the LORD has made her pay double for all her sins.”

**3** A voice cries out,  
“In the wilderness clear a way for the LORD;  
construct in the desert a road for our God.

**4** Every valley must be elevated,  
and every mountain and hill leveled.  
The rough terrain will become a level plain,  
the rugged landscape a wide valley.

**5** The splendor of the LORD will be revealed,  
and all people will see it at the same time.  
For the LORD has decreed it.”

**6** A voice says, “Cry out!”  
Another asks, “What should I cry out?”  
The first voice responds: “All people are like grass,  
and all their promises are like the flowers in the field.

**7** The grass dries up,  
the flowers wither,  
when the wind sent by the LORD blows on them.  
Surely humanity is like grass.

**8** The grass dries up,  
the flowers wither,  
but the decree of our God is forever reliable.”

**9** Go up on a high mountain, O herald Zion!  
Shout out loudly, O herald Jerusalem!  
Shout, don't be afraid!  
Say to the towns of Judah,  
“Here is your God!”

- 10** Look, the sovereign LORD comes as a victorious warrior;  
his military power establishes his rule.  
Look, his reward is with him;  
his prize goes before him.
- 11** Like a shepherd he tends his flock;  
he gathers up the lambs with his arm;  
he carries them close to his heart;  
he leads the ewes along.

- Watching the poetry (twin lines / parallelism)
- The sequence of metaphors
- The surprise: God was with them in Exile
- The admission of overdoing the punishment
- Powerful message of consolation

### Psalm

- Psalm 85 (84) is a prayer for the restoration of Israel and it mirrors closely the sentiments of the first reading.
- The lectionary doesn't use the whole psalm, but the chosen opening lines do express something very similar to Isaiah 40.

### Psalm 85

Let us see, O Lord, your mercy, and give us your saving help.

**I will hear what the Lord God has to say,  
a voice that speaks of peace,  
peace for his people.**

**His help is near for those who fear him  
and his glory will dwell in our land.**

Let us see, O Lord, your mercy, and give us your saving help.

**Mercy and faithfulness have met;  
justice and peace have embraced.**

**Faithfulness shall spring from the earth  
and justice look down from heaven.**

Let us see, O Lord, your mercy, and give us your saving help.

**The Lord will make us prosper  
and our earth shall yield its fruit.**

**Justice shall march before him  
and peace shall follow his steps.**

Let us see, O Lord, your mercy, and give us your saving help.

### Second Reading

2 Pet 3:8 Now, dear friends, do not let this one thing escape your notice, that a single day is like a thousand years with the Lord and a thousand years are like a single day. 9 The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you, because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; when it comes, the heavens will disappear with a horrific noise, and the celestial bodies will melt away in a blaze, and the earth and every deed done on it will be laid bare. 11 Since all these things are to melt away in this manner, what sort of people must we be, conducting our lives in holiness and godliness, 12 while waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God? Because of this day, the heavens will be burned up and dissolve, and the celestial bodies will melt away in a blaze! 13 But, according to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness truly resides.

2 Pet 3:14 Therefore, dear friends, since you are waiting for these things, strive to be found at peace, without spot or blemish, when you come into his presence.

## Gospel

Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way,

3 the voice of one shouting in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Mark 1:4 In the wilderness John the baptiser began preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 People from the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem were going out to him, and he was baptising them in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. 6 John wore a garment made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "One more powerful than I am is coming after me; I am not worthy to bend down and untie the strap of his sandals. 8 I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

- **Layer 1:** The Old Testament: Beginning (Genesis); Gospel (Second Isaiah); Messenger (Malachi); prepare (Second Isaiah); Elijah (2 Kings); Locusts (Leviticus); wild honey (Samson)
- **Layer 2:** The Jesus of History: John baptised Jesus and this made early Christians uneasy; hence the need to locate him firmly as the forerunner — evident in Mark's Gospel but more apparent in Matthew, Luke and John.
- **Layer 3:** The community of Mark's gospel: they practice baptism and confess their sins; because of the context of the Jewish War, they are badly in need of Good News and grounds for hope.
- **Layer 4:** Across the Gospel: Mark 1-8 climaxes with the confession of Peter ("you are the Christ") and Mark 9-16 climaxes with the confession centurion ("Truly this was the Son of God"). Thus even from the very start, Mark has a vision of his whole Gospel.

## Pointers for Prayer

1. Can I remember difficult experiences in my life, which in retrospect turned out to be moments of grace? What about my life and challenges at present?
2. In the life of prayer, it often seems God is absent, especially in difficult times. How do I become aware of this hidden presence of God?
3. Often there are "things" in my life which make it difficult for me to open my whole self to God. What are my mountains and valleys? How do I make a straight highway for my God.
4. A great and constant message in the bible is encapsulated in two phrases: "do not fear" and "here is your God". We all need that deep reassurance.
5. We are carried through life by others, their love and concern, and by God who comes to those "who know their need of God", the poor in spirit. Acknowledgement of the times God has borne me through shadows and dark valleys.

## Prayer

God of love, speak to us your word of comfort that we may be encouraged to lift our voices and acknowledge, "here is our God."

As you have cared for us like a shepherd, may we too care for all among whom we minister, that your Gospel may not only be heard in words but also seen in deeds. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Let's talk