

Sermon for Evensong on the Eighth Sunday after Trinity,
11th August 2019 - Foreboding and Consolation

*Isaiah 11:10 - 12:6; 2 Corinthians 1:1-22 (see
<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=432463430>)*

This morning Godfrey told us, in his sermon, how he had a feeling of foreboding; that he felt that many things were not going well in the world. There is already too much suffering in the world, and he is afraid that things are going to get much worse. Climate change. Wars, and millions of refugees. Inequality. Desperate poverty in the midst of riches. And yes, Brexit too. How can we be consoled? What is God's plan? Is there any hope?

Let's start with some old stuff. About 500 years before the coming of Jesus Christ, the Israelites, God's chosen people, were in exile, in captivity in Babylon, or spread out, a diaspora throughout the ancient Middle East. But Isaiah prophesied that salvation would come.

'On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.

*He will raise a signal for the nations,
and will assemble the outcasts of Israel,
and gather the dispersed of Judah
from the four corners of the earth.'*

This is a reference to the early history of Israel. Following the death of King Solomon in 933BCE, the kingdom broke into two, the south, that of Judah of which the capital was Jerusalem, and the north, called Israel, of which the capital was Samaria. 200 years later, the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians, and, just over a century later,

the Babylonians seized Judah, and deported the people to Babylon. *'By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept'* (*Psalm 137*).

In fact, the exile in Babylon only lasted 50 years, because in 538BCE King Cyrus of Persia liberated the Jews.

Some scholars have suggested that this section in the first part of Isaiah's prophecy looks forward to the coming of the Messiah; and indeed our lesson is just after a famous passage which is usually taken to be a prophecy about the Messiah.

*'...[T]here shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots:
And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, ... with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth ... and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.
And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins.
The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; ... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.'* (*Isaiah 11:1-9*)

There are aspects of the history of Israel which I think we have to be careful about. That one people, one racial group, can be regarded as uniquely chosen by God, as clearly was the understanding in Old Testament times and indeed much later, is now an idea which is perhaps somewhat problematical. Now we think of God as a universal god, as loving everyone in His creation; that God has no favourites.

But let us take it for now that this prophecy is not nationalistic, but it is a vision of God's Kingdom, a vision of the ideal world. Just as Moses had led the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt, so there would be a second gathering, to bring them together out of subjection. Maybe indeed it isn't partial; maybe Isaiah does not exclude the non-Jewish people from his vision of the Kingdom of God. He says,

'And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.' (Isaiah 11:12)

An 'ensign for the nations', a sign for the nations. 'Nations' are the non-Jewish people, the 'Gentiles'. The Messiah would come, the rod of Jesse. He would bring salvation, and bring the exiles home.

But as well as that ancient prophecy, which brought consolation and hope for the people of Israel in their exile, I want to talk about St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, to the people living in the important city that joins Achaia, the mainland of Greece which has Athens in it and extends up to Salonica, and the Peloponnese, the bit with the three prongs on the map, that stick down from the southern part of the mainland of Greece. They were living in the time when Isaiah's prophecies had been fulfilled. The Kingdom, the Messiah, had arrived.

When St Paul was visiting Corinth, Corinth was the administrative centre of the Roman province of Achaia. It is interesting, as it always is with St Paul's letters, to try to work out what he was in effect answering: what the other side of the picture was. What were the Corinthians doing - the Corinthian Christians, that is - that prompted St Paul to

write to them and give them his advice on how to be better Christians? We don't know. But the advice, which St Paul gave in this first part of his letter, was about sympathy, about consolation in times of distress. It was a message which is very relevant today.

Sympathy is saying, 'I feel your pain', and it might extend, to some extent, to vicarious suffering; volunteering to accept punishment or suffer pain which would otherwise be inflicted on someone else. Paul's argument is that God comforts us in all our troubles. In following God in Jesus Christ and being comforted ourselves, we in turn are able to comfort other people in their troubles.

If we have to endure suffering, we are like Christ in that suffering. *'As the sufferings of Christ abound in us'*, said St Paul - but even so, we are consoled, we are comforted, by the way that Jesus triumphed over suffering and death, in his Resurrection. The idea is that that resurrection power, that resurrection consolation, is shared with us as Christians, and so we are able to deal with and withstand any suffering we may undergo.

On the face of it, St Paul has laid out a very neat logical scheme, to show how Christianity 'works' to the good of all who believe. Think of Mrs C.F. Alexander's Christmas carol, 'Once in Royal David's City'.

*'For he is our childhood's pattern
Day by day like us he grew
He was little, weak and helpless
Tears and smiles like us he knew.*

*And he feeleth for our sadness
And he shareth in our gladness.'*

‘And he feeleth for our sadness; And he shareth in our gladness.’ We sometimes say, about somebody, that we ‘feel for them’; or you might say to somebody, ‘I share your pain’. But in a real sense we don’t.

We can’t literally feel what another person feels. We can’t even be sure that what the other person’s senses perceive is the same as what we perceive. On a rather basic level, we sometimes can’t even agree what colour something is. Some people see yellows as greens, or greens as yellows, for example.

One of the most intriguing questions, that always challenges us, is ‘What does it feel like?’ What does it feel like to fly on Concorde? What does it feel like to drive a Ferrari?

The thing is that somebody who’d done those things could tell you all about them; but really you still wouldn’t know what it felt like. And again, in relation to the idea of suffering in somebody else’s place, that somehow or other you can transfer the suffering, there can’t be a literal way of doing that; but where diseases are concerned, there is of course the mechanism of infection; so to some extent that kind of suffering can be transferred - but that’s not what we are thinking about here.

What if we are on the wrong end of some of the things that the ‘Rod of Jesse’ puts right: if we are poor, if we are humble, if we suffer from someone’s wickedness; if the rich and powerful exploit their position to become richer and more powerful, and make us weaker and poorer. Is there some mechanism for passing on, taking away, those things - those ‘tribulations’?

Suppose somebody sidled up to you and said, 'Look: you're poor, and I am rich. Let's swap places.' That might be what St Paul had in mind. It's a bit far-fetched. But let's explore the idea nevertheless.

It might well help my understanding, my sympathy, to swap places with one of the Foodbank's clients for a period. They might enjoy living in my nice house and driving my nice car - and of course, feeding my nice cats. Is that what St Paul, effectively, is talking about? That we should be willing to do what Jesus did, to humble ourselves and become servants? I don't feel your pain. I can't feel your pain. But is there anything which I can do, to take some of that pain away? I can still 'put myself in your place', at least figuratively.

Still thinking about the food bank clients, what types of food do food bank clients eat? Pasta? Or baked beans? But put yourself in their position. What would you like to eat? Surely not just pasta and beans. Actually, poor people like to eat the same stuff that you and I like.

That's our challenge. I think that's what St Paul is saying. To the extent that Jesus took upon himself, in some way, the sins of the world, and symbolically, sacramentally, accepted punishment for them, so we should take contemporary ills upon ourselves: the shortages, the injustices, the things that make people hungry.

We should reach out to people who are suffering, and try to take some of that suffering away from them. We can put it alongside what we know of Christ's suffering, and by sharing it in that way, 'A trouble shared ...' is at least a trouble halved.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant