

2nd Sunday of Advent 2017. A sermon preached by Revd Eleanor Whalley in St Andrew's Church, Soham

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

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm a bit under the weather this morning, so I hope you'll forgive me a prop. I've brought with me one of the prophets: this is Isaiah; and these are his glasses... You'll notice Isaiah has two pairs of glasses: a pair of glasses for seeing close up; and a pair for seeing things at a distance. The thing about Isaiah is that - metaphorically-speaking - Isaiah wears two pairs of glasses at once. Isaiah sees things close up, and he sees things far off, all at the same time.

When we think of the prophets, we tend to think of them in the terms of today's Advent wreath prayer: 'God our Father, you spoke to the prophets of old of a Saviour who would bring peace. You helped them to spread the joyful message of his coming kingdom...'. We think of the prophets as looking into the future. We think of them as bearers of 'a joyful message' - as 'heralds of good tidings'. People who wear long-distance glasses and see good things to come

In one sense that's true - of course the prophets are heralds of good tidings: 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...cry to her that she has served her term... that her penalty is paid...'. That's what Christopher read to us just now.

But there's more to a prophet's role than proclaiming good news. Look at what else that first reading contains: 'Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground will be made level, the rough places plain'. In one sense that is positive - everyone likes a navigable highway. But it's also terrifying - terrifying because of what it tells us about the power of the God who can make such things happen.

And God wields power not just over the physical landscape, but also over the people who dwell within it: he brings low the so called powerful of the earth: v 23-24. The physical levelling is symbolic of the levelling of human society. It's good news for the poor- for those who are low, like the valleys - but it's bad news for the rest of us. Our Advent wreath prayer doesn't tell the half of it.

As he looks through his long distance glasses, Isaiah see it all - the good and the bad, and he proclaims what he sees to his hearers. The compilers of the lectionary, typically, tend only to give us the nice bits. They give us the bits that are easy to swallow - the bits they think we can understand. But if we only hear those, we're only getting half the story.

Then there's the other pair of glasses - the pair that can see close up. We heard a bit about what they see just now: v6 'all people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the constancy of the Lord lasts for ever. None of us like being called fickle - fickle in contrast to the constancy of God.

The prophets see things how things are. They see the status quo. And part of their call is to denounce what's not right.

We get an even stronger sense of that in the first chapters of Isaiah. There there's a very different tone from the tone of the later chapters. Scholars generally agree that because of the changes in tone in the Book of Isaiah, and because of the period of history it spans, there must have been 3 Isaiahs, each responsible for a different chunk of the book. Isaiah splits into 3 distinct sections: chapters 1-39, before the exile; 40-55 during the exile; 56-66 after exile. The first Isaiah begins like this... Is 1: 2-4...

That tone is typical of the prophets: we find the same tone at the start of the Book of the Prophet Amos: Amos 1: 2-5. If we'd read Luke's version of today's Gospel passage - the version we heard was from Mark - we'd've heard the same tone there too. John the Baptist is the bridge between the time of the prophets and the time of Jesus Christ; John is both 'a prophet and more than a prophet', as Christ calls him. He's more than a prophet because he sees the Christ whose coming he foretells.

In the Gospel I read just now, Mark says simply that John calls the people to repentance. Mark doesn't dwell on detail except when he has to; Luke's Gospel gives us the detail - Luke tells us what John says. It's one of my

favourite parts of the Gospels: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is coming?' There's something very like Isaiah and Amos about that. The call to repentance is an urgent call. You'd have to be pretty thick-skinned to resist it.

So what a prophet sees through his glasses is no joke. Pointing out the status quo, denouncing the comfortable, speaking out against injustice isn't an easy task. Later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says this: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem: you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you. The prophets were rarely well-received.'

It's no surprise, then, that when people hear the call to be prophets, they try to wriggle out of it. The most obvious example of that is what happens with Jeremiah: God gives Jeremiah this wonderful commission Jer 1:4-5. And Jeremiah makes his excuses Jer 1:6: 'I am a child; I do not know how to speak'. And yet God makes Jeremiah a promise: 'I am with you to protect you'. The message is clear: prophets make it as prophets not through their own strength, but through power of God who works in them. God will go with them and go before them. He'll give them the words and the courage to say what they have to say.

There's something there I find very powerful: the strength the prophets have is the strength they've been given. You could say, too, I think, that there's a sense that the words the prophets preach are words not just for their hearers but words they need to hear for themselves. Today we heard 'Do not fear'. Maybe Isaiah needed to hear that himself; maybe we need to hear it too.

The point is that the words God spoke to Isaiah he also speaks to us. That's been very real to me this week as I've done my own share of speaking out in relation to Wicken. You may or may not know that there was a meeting in Wicken on Tuesday just gone. The point of that meeting was to bring people up to speed on conversations I've been having with the Diocese over these last few months. I've been telling the Diocese what I can see through my own two pairs of glasses.

If we take the close up glasses first, for some years now, Wicken has not had a full quota of PCC officers. From the end of this year, the church will no longer have a treasurer. Wicken's finances – like Soham's - are in a terrible state. Also like Soham – Wicken has very significant problems with its church building. In the face of those realities, and putting on my other pair of glasses, I've said to Diocese that I think it would be foolish for me to continue to be Priest in Charge of both parishes. I need to focus on one and do one thing well, and the most pressing needs are in Soham. In my defence, I said then, and I say now that I have said that not through a sense of my own incapacity, incapable though I am, but rather because I'm clear about the scale of the work that needs doing. I'm sure that this is the right way to go, and if it's the right way to go, it's the right thing to do.

I'm very pleased to say that the Diocese have heard that and taken it on board, and it's very likely that from early next year I'll cease to be Priest in Charge of Wicken and so be able to focus on Soham. I think that is a good thing – you might think it's a terrible thing – but I think it's a good thing, not only for Soham but also for Wicken which will, in all likelihood, be grouped with parishes to which it is much more similar, instead of being grouped with a growing market town. What is not the case is what many people at Tuesday's meeting have heard, which is that this means curtains for Wicken. It does not mean curtains, it means the beginning of a new stage in thinking about what is best for the Anglican Church in that place.

I'm telling you all that so as to commend it to your prayer, and also to remind you that we are all of us called to be prophets. When we are anointed with oil at our baptism, or at confirmation, we become sharers in the life and death of Christ who is prophet, priest and king. In some mysterious way, Christ's calling as prophet, priest and king is also our calling. We are all of us called to be prophets. Wherever we are – at work, at home, wherever our daily lives lead us, all of us in one way or another are called to put on two pairs of glasses. We're called to look, and we're called to judge whether it's time to speak out. And when things need changing we're called to say so.

And when we say so, we speak not in our own strength, but in the strength of the God whose power is working in us – in the strength of the God who is constant; the God who says 'I am with you to protect you', the God who commands us 'Do not fear'.

Amen.
