

# **Sermon on Sunday 6 December at St Andrew's by Rev. Alan Stewart**

*Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8*



## **Comfort and Joy**

The beauty of our scriptures is that they never fail to speak with a fresh voice into each new generation, each new situation.

As we read again these perhaps familiar passages, this time through the lens of a year in pandemic, what words or phrases, I wonder, take on for us a new meaning, a new significance? For me, those opening lines of the prophet Isaiah strike a timely and powerful chord: "Comfort, comfort my people", says the Lord.'

It echoes this year's 'on point' seasonal message from the Church of England. We've never been, in my lifetime certainly, in such need of a little 'Comfort and Joy'.

These have been particularly uncomfortable times; times of unknowing and uncertainty; times when our usual sources of comfort and joy have been removed or are in short supply. We've each, I imagine, felt that absence of the comfort and joy that comes from physical contact; from the simple presence of others; from familiar faces, familiar places, familiar routines.

And, so, perhaps some of us have sought comfort in other things, like eating or online shopping. Maybe we've escaped into our phones or books or boxsets. Maybe we've allowed inertia to creep in or, alternatively, thrown ourselves into work or hobbies. My German pot collection, I confess, has expanded rather alarmingly over the past eight months. And you know things are bad when you're asking your kids not to mention to mum just how many parcels came for dad today!

This lack of comfort and joy is perhaps why many of us have decked our halls early this year; anything to brighten these dark and dreary days. I've even found myself, the family light-monitor, in normal times a crusader on that endless quest to turn off unnecessary lights, leaving lights on when I leave the house just to have them greet me on my return.

It might seem ironic, therefore, that today we remember one of scripture's more uncomfortable characters; the Baptist. Into not dissimilar times of unrest and disquiet, John came like a tornado from the desert, looking and acting every inch the Old Testament prophet, burdened with a particularly uncomfortable and uncompromising message. This 'Voice... calling in the desert' prepares the way for the coming Messiah in his own inimitable and undiplomatic way, disturbing the comfortably religious, insisting on repentance from all that hinders God's access to our lives, claiming a forgiveness found powerfully in the waters of baptism.

In order to discover the deep comfort of God, John knew that first we must each face the uncomfortable truths about ourselves; the shadows of our lives; the what-we-sometimes-call sin; which is really shorthand for anything that prevents us from becoming the unique person we were created to be.

So, in silence, for a moment, in this pause that Advent allows, let's allow God's Spirit to sift and search our hearts, to surface anything that needs to be levelled or raised (to use the language of Isaiah) so that our lives are made highways to receive and welcome the power and presence of our God.

*Lord, we own and surrender any truth about ourselves that prevents us from being and becoming our true selves.*

The comfort the prophet speaks of is more than mere reassurance; better than the warm bath of an encouraging verse, much more powerful than the soothing 'there, there' of God. In Hebrew, the word translated 'comfort' actually means to strengthen, to encourage, to instill a sense of security. The Latin root of our word 'comfort' literally means 'to strengthen greatly'.

Within the waters of that Jordan river each penitent left their burdens, their regrets, their disappointments, all that hindered their true becoming. And as they stepped out, they stepped into a new world, a new life, with renewed strength and courage and security.

So, in the silence again, picture yourself leaving behind in the water all that is unnecessary, limiting or burdensome, and then stepping forth clothed in the comforting strength and courage and security of your God.

*Lord, clothe us in the comfort and joy we need for this day.*

Together, we rejoice today with all humankind in the long-awaited discovery of a Covid vaccine; a source of great comfort and joy at this time across our world. As talk turns to the return to normality, may we each dedicate ourselves to praying for those tasked with rolling out this vaccine, not least our own local GP surgeries. May we also dedicate ourselves to vow never to return to the normality of before, but to reimagine and work for and fight for a better normal; a new world where all might know the comfort and the joy of our God, the One, as Isaiah reminds us, who longs to gather us in his arms and hold us closely to his chest.