

## **Finding the Peace of God**

10 December, 2017

Advent 2 Year B: Comfort my People

Reading: Isaiah 40, 1-5

Isaiah writes so beautifully today, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

When we think of comfort we think of Sleepyhead pillows and woolrests. But this is not what God is saying through Isaiah to us at all. Words have this way of changing meaning. When I was at school we had a school prayer, written with the best will in the world. It went like this:

*"O merciful Father,  
who knowest all the secrets of our hearts,  
who art the aid of all who need,  
and the helper of all who come to thee for succour. ..."*

When we boys got to the word succour, we used to yell it out. Because a sucker was to us someone who was a mug. The more the teachers tried to stop us yelling succour, the louder we got. In the end they just gave up having the school prayer altogether!

Comfort is another word with a changed meaning. In the Bayeux Tapestry which records 1066 and all that (I think Geraldine has a knitted version), King Harold is poking his troops with a spear. The instruction along the bottom gives a clue to the change of meaning. King Harold, it says, is "comforting" his troops.

For Isaiah comfort means to liberate. Imagine how different Handel's Messiah would sound, if the soloist sang, "Liberate my people, O liberate my people says your God."

Liberating the people of God is exactly what John the baptizer was calling the people to - a liberation.

The valleys will be lifted up, and the mountains made low. This is not something small. This is nothing short of God coming into history!

But what do we need to be liberated from?

Deep down most of us find it hard to trust in a God who wants the best for us, a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We think we somehow have to earn the right for God to love us. The good news of Advent 2 is that God wants us to have peace. As we light the candle of peace we are reminded of the deep abiding peace which God holds out to us. But surely this peace can only be found when we are in good times?

Like me you might have sung the song *It is Well with my Soul*. And, like me, you would expect the writer of that hymn to have everything together and all his ducks in a row.

Horatio G. Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago with a lovely family - a wife Anna, and five children. They were not strangers to tears and tragedy. Their young son died with pneumonia in 1871 and, in that same year, much of their business was lost in the great Chicago fire. Worse was to come. In 1873 his wife and four daughters were crossing the Atlantic from the U.S. to Europe. He needed to stay behind and planned to follow a few days later.

About four days into the crossing of the Atlantic, the ship carrying Anna and the children collided with a powerful, iron-hulled Scottish ship going the other direction.

Suddenly, all of those on board were in grave danger. Anna hurriedly brought her four children to the deck. Twelve minutes later the ship slipped beneath the dark waters of the Atlantic carrying with it 226 of the passengers including the four children.

A sailor, rowing a small boat over the spot where the ship went down, spotted a woman floating on a piece of the wreckage. It was Anna, still alive. He pulled her into the boat and they were picked up by another large vessel.

With the death of his son and daughters, the failure of his business, and the fire that had destroyed everything they owned on his heart, Horatio embarked for his own voyage. When his ship stopped at the spot the girls had perished he was overcome with emotion went below to his cabin and what did he do?

He penned these words:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Chorus:

*It is well with my soul,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Despite, indeed, because of everything that had happened he knew the peace of God which passes all understanding.

Next Sunday we have invited all those who we have celebrated funerals for in the last year. Fifty invites went out. Some of those invited are well known to us, some less well known.

The description of the work of John the baptizer reminds me of a description of a Roman road. The valleys will be filled, the mountains made flat and the pathway of our God made straight. The valley of the shadow of death many have walked this year. I am reminded of the 23rd Psalm: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.* For those who have a natural, good grief the valley is slowly and gently climbed out of. But for those stuck in the valley of the shadow of death there can be no peace or joy or love or hope.

This is what God stands to liberate us all from.

It's not just the death of a loved one that takes us into this valley. It can be the death of a dream or a relationship or ill health or loss of mobility.

Advent is so important because it reminds us that no matter how deep that valley seems, God comes alongside us and wants to lift us up to a new place. This lifting up, goes by the name of liberation.

May we come to know the peace, love, joy and hope of God in our lives.  
"Liberate my people, O liberate my people, says our God."