

Sunday 4 December 2005: Second Sunday of Advent

Prophetic comfort

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

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together

The history of the Army Chaplains' Department claims that the tradition of troops being accompanied into battle by priests or other ministers dates back to the time of the Norman conquest. Bishop Odo of Bayeux, brother of William the Conqueror, is himself reported to have led 120 knights into battle. In one section of the Bayeux Tapestry, Bishop Odo is depicted poking his soldiers forward with a large spear-like stick. The Latin inscription above it translates as: *This is Bishop Odo comforting his troops.*

That understanding of comfort goes back to the Latin origins of the word "con fortis" = "with strength". We rarely use it in such a way now. Comfort, for me, at least, conjures up much cosier images of squidgy armchairs around a roaring fire on a frosty night; a pair of well worn slippers; a glass of something warming. Amos my cat does comfort to an Olympic standard – curled up on the bed on a December afternoon in the perfect position to catch the last shafts of low winter sunlight. Perhaps it's because I carry these images of the word comfort in my head that I struggle when people tell me they find their faith a great comfort – I inwardly rage against a God of cosy fireside chats. And I suspect that my cat's namesake, Amos and the other Hebrew prophets would have an understanding of the word "comfort" perhaps somewhat nearer to the strenuous encouragement of Bishop Odo than my image of cosiness.

Today in lighting the second candle our Advent ring, we particularly remember those Hebrew prophets. We remember them as those who spoke the word of God with truth and courage into all sorts of situations and by so doing kept alive the hope of the Kingdom, and pointed to the fulfilment of that Kingdom in the coming of Christ. They did indeed speak "con fortis" - with strength – but their message was anything but comfortable in the cosy sense of the word. Perhaps, it's because some of the words of the prophets are so familiar to us and roll off the tongue with such poetic ease, that it's easy to lose sight of the strength of the words. And you have to think a little about the context of what they were saying to get to the real hard-edged truth.

At the time when the people of Israel were about to be taken in to exile in Babylon, for example, the prophet Jeremiah, found himself up against "false prophets" who predicted that the exile would be short and relatively painless, because that's what most wanted to hear. Not so, said Jeremiah there's no news of cosy-comfort here – just the reality of the people's faithlessness and the burning holiness of God's righteousness. When they finally found themselves in exile, it was another of the great prophets – Ezekiel – who refused to succumb to the cosy school of prophecy. Far from home, in a strange land, just when things couldn't get worse, Ezekiel says "actually they can" and goes on to give a vision of the glory of God leaving the Temple – the holiness of God cannot stay in a rebellious house in the midst of a rebellious people."

The middle part of the book of Isaiah, where today's reading came from, is in many ways one of the gentler of the prophets. His message comes from the end of that period of Israel's exile when at last the possibility of return to their homeland was emerging.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term

Yet even Isaiah's vision of comfort and hope has a hard reality about it:

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

Even as hope appears on the horizon, Isaiah knows the reality of human frailty and inconstancy. There is no comfort to be found in human resources alone.

By now, we're probably all feeling thoroughly depressed and wondering why on earth we listen to these doom ridden words. But that's actually just part of the story. The prophetic voice of criticism is just a part of what the theologian Walter Brueggemann calls the "prophetic imagination". It's that gift of imagination, that ability to envisage an alternative consciousness, a different way of being which makes a prophet speak with such critical strength of what he or she sees around them. It really doesn't have to be like that – is the heart of the critical prophetic imagination. And the other part of the imagination is what Brueggemann calls prophetic energising – the capacity to express new realities, new ways of being, new visions of freedom that challenge the hopelessness embodied in statements like "this is the way it is".

But the two gifts of the prophetic imagination – criticism and energising – go hand in hand and together are rooted in a burning vision of God's power and glory.

The prophetic imagination is fired by that vision to speak with critical strength and to fearlessly unmask all that speaks of false power - all that speaks of false glory - for such is idolatry. The prophetic imagination is fired by that vision to speak with energising strength of a very different image of power and glory based on the burning holiness of God. Jeremiah didn't simply speak words of doom – he spoke with prophetic energy of the days when that burning holiness would be written in the hearts of the people of God. Ezekiel didn't simply speak of the departure of God's glory – he spoke with prophetic energy of a time when even the bones of the wilderness would rise to new life through the burning holiness of the breath of God.

Isaiah didn't simply despair of human frailty, but spoke with prophetic energy of the constancy of God's word and of the time when, through the speaking of that word in human flesh, all people would see God's glory.

And in the greatest possible expression of prophetic imagination, that same Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, became the embodied criticism of all false power and glory on the cross of Calvary and the embodiment of energising hope in the eternal power and glory of his resurrection.

False claims to power and glory are all too easy to find around us today – the power of gross economic injustice, the glory of devastating military might, the power of exclusive doctrinal purity, the glory of meaningless celebrity adulation.

Perhaps the challenge for us this Advent is to encourage one another to exercise our critical prophetic imagination by rejecting all such false claims of power and glory and the easy comfort they bring. Perhaps the challenge for us this Advent is to discover the energy of our own prophetic imagination by renewing our own burning vision of God's power and glory. And in so doing, we might begin to challenge the infectiousness hopelessness that says "this is the way it is". We might begin to embody a new reality that reveals the glory of the Lord among us, that all people might see it together.