



Second Sunday of Advent  
4 December 2011

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## Go up to a high mountain

A sermon by Revd Clare Herbert

### Readings: Isaiah 40.1-11; Mark 1.1-8

Go up to a high mountain, joyful messenger to Zion  
Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God

I am bitterly disappointed by my advent calendar this year. I had done all the right things – bought it from the Dulwich Picture Gallery not Boots the Chemist, made sure it had a religious picture on from the Fitzwilliam Museum no less, given away my madly secular calendars of the changing of the guard outside Buckingham palace – all snow flakes and glitter and blue, and what do I find for my pains when I open the windows – squirrels? Vases? What do they have to do with pointing me to Christmas?

Much of my time as a Christian pastor is taken up in window opening. I try to stay alongside people as they open the windows into their faith to help them in the difficult times and hard decisions of their lives. What do we find there to offer healing where impaired judgements are being made through frailty? What do we find there to offer guidance where decision making is complex in the extreme? What do we find there where judgements are being made in ignorance? When we open the windows of faith what do we find there to help to heal impairment, to guide in serious complexity, to inform where we are ignorant?

Healing. Often our judgements are impaired, by poor health, by overwhelming emotion, by the grinding down of stress, by wherever we are in the extremes of youth and age. These days I try to visit as often as I can an elderly lady who was very kind to me in the days of my first parish job in Bristol. She lost her husband a year ago and remains utterly devastated by that death. She lives in a darkness of loneliness she never conceived possible in her life before. But on top of the darkness and confusion of grief she adds a level of dangerous self-blame. I shouldn't be like this, no one will want me around like this, I ought just to die – and if she isn't careful she jolly well will, so profound is her self-hate, so impaired is her judgement by the shock of grief.

She shows me how difficult it may be to trust our judgements made in frailty or injury or dis-ease and how we need to find windows into healing.

Guidance. Life can throw up for us if we remain aware of the needs of others as well as of ourselves the most complex ethical judgements to make. I care pastorally for a much younger woman who has been working in education projects in the developing world for most of her middle life. Her most prized project, her baby if you like, is failing through lack of funds and political changes of enormous weight in the country where the project is set. How does she as a Christian manage rest and change for herself, badly needed, and her awareness of heart wrenching deprivation among those she may have to leave? How do we manage our prosperity as well as our awareness of poverty and need – a question which today's Christmas Appeal made on our behalf so movingly by Richard this morning and seen on the pictures on our railings outside throws up to us as a huge challenge.

This friend shows me the many complex strands in our decision making about how we use the very precious moments and energies of our lives, how we need to find windows into wisdom.

Knowledge – How often our judgements may be clouded in ignorance. A recent report into the attitudes of people living in our so called sink estates revealed how much resentment leading to violence may be caused by people simply not knowing how decisions are reached about housing and nursery and benefits resources – often false impressions being raised that immigrants somehow get more than the local indigenous population of the area. In a similar way I feel utterly powerless and frightened in my lack of understanding of the current economic crisis facing Europe and our own country. Ignorance breeds a sense of powerlessness and unhelpful passivity.

I see how superficial may be our judgements in situations where we know little.

Human judgements may be difficult to make at best, at their worst deeply flawed. Yet we have to go on making them and for that we need help and an awareness of that which is less flawed, less superficial, less dis-eased, that which transcends our impairment and lostness and ignorance – one going before us whose existence is an offering to lead us out.

In Advent we hear the message that God will be our judge. There it is in today's readings

“The glory of Yahweh shall be revealed, and all human beings shall see it, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken”

In His coming Son, the mind of the triune God is known

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”

When we open the windows of our Advent scriptures what do we find of the judgement of God to bring us hope in ourselves and help in the judgements we have to make? How is all this linked with Baptism, the sacrament we enter this morning – which is vitally important not only for young Oskar but also for all of us entering that sacrament as witnesses in solidarity with him?

Let's take a look at both scriptures and action, let's open these advert windows and see.

In a moment Oskar's head will be exposed to the strange sensation of water being poured over it in a public place by a stranger and with all his clothes on, not in his own bathroom at home with his own mum or dad. He will probably not know what is happening for a moment and feel all at sea, his bearings of what is normal lost for just one split second – which is when youngsters usually and quite understandably cry! This morning's readings remind us that God comes to us in the bewildering wilderness spaces of our lives and of our society's life, where the usual signs of normality may be missing and our sense of identity lost. The wild prophetic challenge of the scarcely clothed John the Baptist takes us straight to the heart of Baptism's meaning which is also Advent's meaning - we are stripped of our pretensions to stand ready to receive Christ. And it is often the difficulties of our lives and the hard decisions we have to make which does this stripping business for us – in their breaking us down they offer us the first signs of our healing – this is what we are like, naked and bewildered before God.

Then, as Oskar is being washed in the water of Baptism he will be held firm in a loved one's arms, and afterwards be held up before us for our welcome in those same firm arms. He is not alone! Notice the words of the Prophet Isaiah comforting his people in the bewilderment of exile. There on the Way of our journey God will provide spaces for grace, situations of graciousness, God will hold us. Even where things are arid and frightening God's mercy undergirds us - guidance for us to unearth and know.

“He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast. He leads to their rest the ewes tired from giving birth and feeding.”

All our services and prayers and Bible study and being together – there to teach us that holding.

Then Oskar will be not only given a candle but challenged to bear the light of Christ in the world. As a tiny boy he begins the slow human taking up of his own life, thoughts, words, actions, judgements into the light of Christ's own compassion and justice and love – he begins the journey we are all on in the whole of our life. Christ's face will shine on his and ours enabling our personal lives as playmates, lovers, parents, friends and our political lives as responsible citizens creating light and responding to light. We with Oskar are asked to repent which means to turn and turn again – towards the light.

The first followers of Jesus were called followers of the Way and today's scripture readings offer us a Way. Baptism is the entry point into that Way, in all its bewilderment, holding, and light. Where we may have this morning an awareness of the deep waters of death or darkness or difficult decisions to make, may we with Oskar and his family enter into this Baptism's meaning. May we find this our gate of entry into the Way, and so steep ourselves in the bewilderment and self-loss of God's challenge to us, while clinging fast to his holding, that we rise up out of that water, filled with God's judgement of hope.

Thanks be to God.