

Second Sunday of Advent Year B

Advent is both the end and the beginning of the Christian year. It begins by pointing us to the end of all things in the fulfilment of God's mission of love, and then leads us gently through some key moments and key people in the story of that mission of love, especially in relation to the coming of Jesus

Old Testament

Isa 40: 1-11

One of the slightly odd features of the prophetic literature is its occasional reference to a "heavenly council", in which God is heard deliberating with his "colleagues". This idea is in fact quite a common theme, found also in the opening story of the book of Job. The voices heard in verses 3 and 6 are different voices from among this council, reflecting upon the words of God in verses 1 and 2.

One possible explanation for this idea is that it gives the prophetic narrator an opportunity to voice God's musings and deliberations on God's future actions. Without doubt it also tends to reduce the ways of God to a human scale, implying cogitation on God's part, weighing this and that course of action. Any God-talk is risky. We might get it appallingly wrong. In our human thinking about God we need to remember that God is infinitely removed from our scale – as far as the east is from the west – and we'll never ever capture a pen-portrait of God in words of our making.

The NIV and NRSV have different translations of verse 9. In NRSV Zion is commanded to be the herald of good tidings to the cities of Judah. In NIV another herald figure is commanded to bring good tidings to Zion and the cities of Judah. One possible explanation of this curiosity is that a feminine form of the word "herald" is found here, giving rise to an association with "daughter Zion". But nowhere else in this part of Isaiah is Zion depicted as herself being the herald. This herald-figure, then, is Zion's own emissary who climbs to the highest point in order the better to see God's coming, and announce it to the Great City.

Ps 85: 1-2, 8-13

The opening verses of this psalm remind God (and of course the people who chant the psalm) of God's steadfast forgiving love towards God's people. The omitted verses complain that God is now angry with his people, and it feels like this anger has been going on a long time, with no end in sight.

In verses 8-13 the theme of serene confidence in God is restored and expressed in the most sublime language.

Epistle: 2 Pet 3: 8-15a

The recipients of Peter's letter were evidently experiencing not only their own inner doubts about the return of Jesus (how long, Lord, how long?) but also the derisive jeers of a sceptical public opinion (see verse 4).

Peter begins by pointing them back to the sources of authority for their Christian beliefs about the end – the words of the Holy Prophets and the commands of the Saviour. After denouncing the sceptics (verses 3-7) he encourages their faith by first making two points: first, the divine “timescale” is bound to be very different from our own; and second, what they (his readers) experience as delay is in fact divine forbearance in not wanting to act hastily in final judgement.

In verses 11-15a we see Peter's application of these beliefs to the conduct of his folk. They are to lead lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening (NRSV) or earnestly desiring the return of the Lord.

Gospel: Mark 1: 1-8

Lovers of the Concerto form of classical music, in which a solo instrument and an orchestra hold a conversation (or sometimes a contest), will understand that composers of concertos vary in the way they introduce the solo instrument. At one point of musical history it was conventional for the orchestra to “have first go” at the basic musical material, and prepare the way for the arrival of the soloist by whetting the audience's appetite. In his Fifth Piano Concerto, Beethoven cast aside these conventions by giving the piano soloist a very prominent and florid introduction. The mould was well and truly broken.

Among the gospels it is Mark who seems to be out of line. In this introductory paragraph Jesus, the central character, doesn't appear at all. All is haste; the writer cuts to the chase with barely dignified urgency

The opening announcement is terse and abrupt, getting straight to the point. There is a quotation from Isaiah 40:3 about a herald announcing in the desert that a way must be prepared for the coming of our God, and then Mark gives us his pen-portrait of John the Baptist. The precise sequence of the descriptions in this section is of some interest. Why, for example, does Mark place verse 6 – an arresting description of John's physical appearance, reminiscent of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) – *after* his account of the way great crowds flocked to hear his preaching and receive baptism at his hands? Professor Morna Hooker argues that Mark's aim is to keep the *content* of John's ministry to the fore; his *style* is interesting only insofar as it evokes memories of Elijah.