

**Sunday 10 December 2023**

**Advent 2B**

**Worcester**

*Isaiah 40.1-11*

*Mark 1.1-8*

'The grass withers, the flower fades: but the word of our God will stand for ever.'

Some of you were sitting here last night, listening to the annual performance of Handel's *Messiah*. And you won't have failed to notice, of course, that *Messiah* begins with today's first reading.

So the tenor proclaims 'Comfort ye, comfort ye me people', and then sings the aria 'Every valley shall be exalted'. And then the chorus bursts in – 'And the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, for the Lord has spoken.'

Great stuff! And after this glorious opening, Handel comes back to today's reading just a little bit later on, with 'O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion' and 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd.'

*Messiah* is, as its name suggests, a meditation on the person and work of Jesus Christ – his birth, death and resurrection.

The libretto is taken entirely from the Bible. And if you study it carefully you'll soon notice that a very high proportion of the text comes from the Old Testament.

For Handel and his librettist, Charles Jennens, to get to know Jesus means reading not just the gospels, important though they are, but also the Hebrew Bible and especially the prophets.

The books of the prophets make up roughly a third of the Old Testament, along with the books of the law, histories and other writings. Their ancient witness is part of the warp and weft of Christian faith.

Isaiah, with his emphasis on the faithfulness of God, saviour of his people, looking for the day of peace and justice when all the world will come to worship in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah, warning of judgement but promising the survival of the faithful remnant. Ezekiel, reassuring the people that God was still with them despite the dislocation of exile.

Daniel, far from home in Babylon, having strange visions including one of the Son of Man, a messiah who will come on the clouds with angels. Zechariah and Haggai, encouraging the rebuilding of the Temple.

Before all them, Amos, scathing about the injustice he saw in Israel. Hosea, calling on the people to repent of idolatry and to trust in God's mercy.

I said just a couple of weeks ago that the rise of the prophets was in some ways a response to the rapid decline in the quality of the kings of Israel and Judah.

As kingship declined further and further from the ideal never quite realised even in King David, so the prophets began to yearn for a new kind of king in Israel – a new David, a new messiah.

That's one of the most obvious themes we get in the prophets, especially Isaiah, which is why we read so much of him at this time of year.

Comfort my people. Prepare the way of the Lord. A virgin will bear a son and will name him Emmanuel. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid.

A child has been born for us, a son given to us – Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

How is it that these words, spoken in oracles by the prophet Isaiah in one context can also become for us the Word of God and words about Jesus Christ in another context?

What does the Church believe about the Bible? What do I believe? That it is the word of God. That the words of the Bible reveal to us Jesus Christ, the Word of his Father. In the Bible, God the Father speaks to us his children.

It follows that I believe that God is himself the author of the Bible. Of course the scriptures are human words, but they are divinely inspired, written down and passed on under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Myself, I do not believe there is a contradiction between these two things, acknowledging the human authorship of the biblical texts but also recognising the divine author to whom they always point.

The faith of the Church is that Jesus Christ is at once fully human and fully God. Being human does not make Jesus any less divine. Being God does not make him any less human. The two categories are not mutually exclusive.

So it is with the words of the Bible. They are human words but also divine words without there being any contradiction between these two statements.

I expect you've noticed the response we make to the first two readings at this eucharist. "This is the word of the Lord".

For a number of years we've used here in the cathedral an unauthorised response which, I think, was an attempt to fudge whether or not we thought any particular reading was actually the word of God.

I understand this. I believe that the Bible is the word of the Lord. That doesn't mean I always find this easy to believe. With some passages of scripture, it can be quite difficult to see how they are the word of the Lord!

But the Bible begins with the idea of God, not so much a craftsman shaping the world with his hands, but a speaker bringing the world into being through his word.

God gives his words to Moses – in Hebrew, the ten commandments are in fact called simply ‘the ten words’. Time and time again, the prophets proclaim that the word of the Lord came to them.

Jesus takes the words of the Old Testament to be the word of God. ‘It is written, it is written ...’ So today’s Gospel begins – ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah ...’

He himself is God’s Word made flesh, the incarnation of the creating and ordering wisdom of God. And as Genesis opens with God speaking the world into being, so Revelation ends with testimony to the word of God in Jesus.

Saint Augustine said that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and that the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.

Another way of putting this might be to say that the Bible rhymes. Things and events that happen in one time and place reoccur or resonate in another.

This is not surprising. God is faithful and consistent. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. And so there are hallmarks and themes, characteristic of the way God always interacts with his people.

So Isaiah's proclamation of the salvation of God in one context can later come to be seen as a prophecy of the even greater work of salvation in a new context.

That's why Isaiah is quoted by Mark, as we've already seen in Handel's *Messiah*. Or, if you noticed it from the same reading, why another bit of Isaiah is quoted by the first letter of Peter (and later became an anthem by Wesley).

We call this pattern of echoes and resonances in the scriptures, typology. Events and things that appear in the Old Testament become types and hallmarks that reappear in the New Testament.

Jesus himself says that, 'You search the scriptures, because in them you have eternal life and they bear witness to me'.

Jesus uses typology when he speaks of the three days Jonah spent in the belly of the fish, of the bronze serpent in the desert, of manna in the wilderness, of himself as the Son of Man or the Light of the World.

He uses these types to describe and explain himself. On the road to Emmaus he opens the pages of the Old Testament and gives the two disciples a Bible study like no other.

Adam and Noah and Abraham and Moses and David become types of Christ. Eve becomes a type of Mary.

The ark becomes a type of the Church. Passing through the Red Sea and crossing the Jordan foreshadow baptism. Manna foreshadows the eucharist.

For me, the key to this is something Paul says in one of his letters –

‘We constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word.’

The words of the apostles, words of the prophets, the words of Jesus, are for us the Word of God.

And so ‘The grass withers, the flower fades: but the word of our God will stand for ever.’