

Sunday 28th November 2021 – First Sunday of Advent: HOPE (Isaiah 40:1-11)

In our Daily Inspirations over the last couple of weeks we've been looking at the amazing Old Testament story of Esther. The book of Esther is rarely studied by the modern church, and that's partly because it's the one book of the bible that doesn't use the word God anywhere. To which some of you might be asking: in that case, how did the book of Esther end up in the bible?

The title for our series gives it away: I called it 'The Hidden Hand of God' because **God's presence was there *throughout* the book even if he wasn't mentioned by name.** God was quietly at work making Esther the queen of a pagan nation, using her adopted father Mordecai to foil a plot which saved the king's life, bringing Esther favour with the king at just the right moment, prompting a sleepless king to check the annals of his reign which led to his realising that he hadn't rewarded Mordecai for his service, and eventually granting Esther request to spare her people, while the enemy in the story got his come-uppance.

You could write it all off as coincidence, but there are so many 'coincidences' it's hard not to conclude that a great and miraculous divine rescue has taken place. And in fact, God's name is mentioned, but in a form of code. The letters of God's name appear five times in the text – four of them in the key moments – spelling the start of successive words. To a Jewish reader familiar with Hebrew manuscripts the hint would have been obvious. Hundreds of years later, the greatest storyteller of them all dropped similar hints about divine activity in this world and gave this encouragement: 'The one who has ears to hear, let them hear.'

Today begins the season of Advent, and as is customary on the first Sunday in our modern Advent we think about the theme of Hope. And our passage presents us with a similar challenge to the one we find in Esther. The word 'hope' isn't mentioned anywhere in the text!

But look a bit harder, read between the lines and this passage is about hope, all right: 'Comfort, comfort my people' says your God. To a nation in mourning, regretting their past and doubting their future, the prophet speaks a new word. He may not use the word 'hope' anywhere, but all the words he *does* use make it clear that what is stirring here is something new, something which points to a better future. And the confidence that something good is coming, that the future will be better than the present, is the very definition of hope.

So he uses a word like **'proclaim' (v2)** – 'proclaim to Jerusalem that her hard service has been completed and her sin has been paid for.' So there is a new message: the era of judgement is coming to an end and a new age of grace will arrive. Later in the passage this message is described as 'good news', and there is nothing better than proclaiming good news!

Then the prophet uses **another hopeful word: 'prepare' (v3)** – 'prepare the way for the Lord, make a new highway for God... and the glory of the Lord will be revealed.' This week they've been putting in some new traffic-calming measures on a new road just round the corner from where I live. And throughout the week there have been vehicles loading and unloading, and occasionally blocking the road. It's been disruptive, *but there's a reason*: the end result is to create a better highway.

It's the same for the people of God – there has been disruption, but now God is promising a new highway, which everyone can use. Which brings us to **our third hopeful word: 'people'** – or rather 'all people'. God's promises are for everyone: 'all people' will see the glory of God (v5). And the reason is made clear in v6: it's because 'all people' need God's help to be the people they were made to be – their 'faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.'

Next we come to **another important word: 'power' (v9)**. It's one thing to make promises, but quite another to keep them. So what we need to know is: who is making this set of promises? And the hopeful answer is that it is the Sovereign Lord, who can *definitely* keep those promises, because he 'rules with a mighty arm'.

Our final hopeful word doesn't begin with 'p': **'shepherd' (v11)** – but if you'll allow me the modern rendering, that would be 'pastor'! And this pastor tends the flock, carries the lambs and gently leads the lambs' parents. It's a wonderful balancing of the previous verses: God's power is also displayed through his tender love and care. The two blend together, so that this God is presented not as a terrifying tyrant but a loving parent, strong but gentle.

So this is a passage full of hope. It may not use the word, but it's written between the lines throughout. Perhaps this is a perfect way for us to approach Advent this year. We face challenging times: the news is downbeat, the pandemic just rumbles on and on, we make plans to see loved ones but wonder if we'll be able to. Where is hope? The **answer is to find the message of hope written between the lines of our lives**. We might not use the word, but we can see its effects. Advent is the season when we give time to read between the lines, and find that message of hope again.

Indeed, the glorious message of Advent is that hope is just around the corner. It may be dark, but light will come, as surely as morning follows night. There is still a voice calling: prepare the way! Prepare the way!

Hope is the confident expectation that things will be better than they are. That may not be tomorrow, or next week or next month: but one day, 'the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.' And so we wait, and we pray, and we get ready. And may the God who is always doing new things speak a word of fresh hope to us this Advent, as we prepare the way for the Lord. Amen.