

Sunday 10th December – Second Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 40:6-11 'A word of good news'

So, if *you* were asked to describe Christmas in three words, what would you say? I must confess I related to many of the ideas in the video we've just watched – including 'Bah humbug', dare I say! I might add some of my own: 'Dear Father Christmas' which is what we always shouted up the chimney on Christmas Eve. Indeed, even in my early 20s heading back for a few days' break with mum and dad, they insisted I shout this up the chimney or there would be no presents.

'The Queen's speech' would be another – and I know, it's the King's speech now, but until last year the only speech I'd ever heard was the Queen's – I sort of wish she'd recorded some extra messages in her last year. 'Christmas Day leftovers' would be a third – which seemed to go on forever in my home growing up – but that's buying a 20lb turkey for you. In fact, nowadays 'Boxing Day curry' (another three words) has changed to 'Christmas Day curry,' which is our new tradition, and I have to say, immensely liberating!

As you probably know, the idea for the video was the app 'what three words' which carves up the entire surface of the world into 2m² sections, all pinpointed by three words. It's great fun finding your home – one end of our house is 'tend.holds.live' – which, helpfully, is almost an anagram of 'Trendall house'. The other end is 'income.trees.leaves' which is also eerily appropriate as there's a big tree outside the window on that side (although it doesn't generate any income!).

The prophet faced a similar dilemma in the next part of Isaiah 40, verses 6-11, our passage for today. 'A voice says 'cry out'' – there's good news to share, and, as we saw last week, a herald ready to share it. But the herald needs help – 'what shall I cry?' What three words shall I say?

And God gives them a series of three words – and **the first is this: 'The grass withers'**. This sounds a bit eccentric until you realise that the image here is of transience – people are described as being like grass – easily blown, and whose time on earth is limited. Our faithfulness is like a flower – beautiful in its time, but that time doesn't last very long. In terms of our obedience to God, we humans are not very good at being faithful. That's why God's people are in the situation they're in. We all need grace.

And, fortunately, the voice of the Lord gives Isaiah a **second three words: 'God's word endures'**. Our as v8 puts it: 'The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.' This glorious promise, which God is giving his people here, is going to last. There's no sell-by date on the glory of the Lord that will be revealed. God is not like us, he doesn't wither or fall – his promises are sure.

Again, what a lovely promise for us in this season of Advent. Last week we were given a word of comfort – God has not forgotten you. Today, we take heart from the truth that God keeps his promises. His word endures.

And there's yet more to come – because this is also a word of good news. And **the good news is our next three words: 'Here's your God!'** (OK, without the apostrophe it's four words, but cut me some slack!) Which immediately begs the question: what kind of God is this?

What Isaiah tells us is that God is both majestic and intimate. The theologians like to talk of God's transcendence and immanence – the one in the heavens, who is also our divine loving parent. And this is exactly the image of God we see here. 'See the Sovereign Lord comes with power,' verse 10 begins, 'and he rules with a mighty arm.' Our God is a great big God, as someone once sang.

But that's not the whole picotee. We are not just to cower before this awesome, majestic God. Looks at what comes next, in verse 11: 'He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.'

What a beautiful image of the Lord! And it's one that Jesus directly picks up twice in the gospels: in his dialogue with the pharisees in John where he describes himself as **the Good Shepherd**; and also in Luke 15, with the fantastic story of **the shepherd who goes after his lost sheep**, carrying it home, on his shoulders, close to his heart. It's possible that Jesus even references this passage in Isaiah 40 a third time, when he describes himself as 'gentle and lowly in heart' – picking up two key words to describe God here.

'You who bring good news to Zion.... Lift up your voice with a shout;' don't be afraid to declare this good news. And what is this good news? Our video reminds us that the best three-word summary of the good news of Christmas is: 'God with us.' Today in this passage, we get a lovely image of what that actually means – what does it look like for God to be with us?

It means relying on a God who is faithful, who keeps his promises; it means trusting a God who is awesome and majestic, a great big God who has all the power and wisdom we need; and finally it means resting in the presence of a gentle, loving shepherd, one who leads us gently, gathers us in his arms and carried us close to his heart.

Here, indeed, is our God. Perhaps today you need to seize again that truth that God keeps his promises. Perhaps you need a great big God for your troubles. Perhaps you just need the Lord to carry you close to his heart. This is our word of good news – may the Lord speak it to all of us again today. Amen.