

Sermon by Rod Prince
Third Sunday of Advent, 2006

Heavenly Father, give us the faith to receive your Word, the understanding to know what it means, and the courage to put it into practice; through Jesus Christ our Lord

I am a great fan of the the late American comedian Bob Newhart. Reading the passage for Isaiah reminded me of a skit that he wrote imagining a conversation between an official of the West Indies Company and Sir Walter Raleigh called the Introduction of Tobacco. Part of it goes like this

Hey Harry, you want to pick up the extension I've got nutty Wal on the phone.

Hey Wal, how are you? Have you got another winner for us Wal? What have you got for us this time?

What's that Wal? You've got what? You've got a boatload of leaves for us Wal. Say Wal this might come as a surprise to you but come autumn in England we're kind of up to our In leaves Wal!

When you have been up to your... in water for the last many weeks it is difficult to appreciate the full beauty of a passage which talks of more water welling up in the middle of the arid desert. In fact had Isaiah lived in Wirksworth he might have grown to like deserts and sunny weather.

So I would like you to shut your eyes, those of you who haven't already been tempted to do so and in your imagination leave a dark wet chilly Wirksworth and come with me to a place where Isaiah's vision occurs on an annual basis.

We are going to Oman. It is late June. The temperature in the piercing sunshine is 50 degrees C. You cannot stand too close to walls because the heat is so intense. It cuts into your throat as you leave your air conditioned room and climb into the taxi for the journey to the airport. We are catching an internal flight from the capital Muscat to travel 900 kms south to the coastal town of Salalah. It nestles by the sea under a steep escarpment which rises to a spine of mountains or jebels running westwards into the Yemen. Just to give a Christmas flavour this is the land of the Queen of Sheba where the highest quality Frankincense is harvested.

On the flight down there is little to see. It is a harsh landscape. Sand disappears and is replaced by outcrops of bare limestone. One road links Muscat with Salalah. It winds through the occasional oases, one horse or more realistically one-camel towns. After just over an hour the plane starts its descent and suddenly you see the escarpment and Salalah stretched alongside the shoreline. At one end the port, two animal feedmills (the reason for my many visits) and at the other the Royal Farm and Palace. The present Sultan's Mother was a local Jebali – a person living in the mountains above Salalah and the Sultan's regular visits to the region hold the loyalty of these people.

We have arrived a little before the annual phenomenon is known as the Hareef. Every year the edge of the mountains around Salalah catch the tail end of the Indian monsoons. For six weeks it rains, quite literally in the desert and just as in the reading from Isaiah the desert blossoms abundantly. Waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand does become a pool. Grass carpets arid soil. Trees break out into leaf and everywhere one sees beautiful and exotic flowers and insects. Streams flow in the dried river beds or wadis and the mountains are transformed from inhospitable barren places to a lush green curtain draped behind a now bustling city. It is not just the landscape that is transformed but people also.

Salalah wakes up. For just this short period people from all over the Gulf come to Salalah. Like us they fly or drive in their thousands down the one road. They come to escape the stifling heat of the desert kingdoms; the stress of the rapid growth in their region. They come just to walk in the cool rain, to paddle in the streams and to witness the transformation from a sterile desert to an abundance of life. They come to be refreshed; to be renewed.

Isaiah's great vision of hope reached out to a scattered people in exile. It foretells of a time of transformation when the Promised Land and God's people will be restored and refreshed.

It is a vision of homecoming; a return for a prodigal people after a period of despair and distress. It offers the exciting prospect of leaving a foreign land living under pagan rulers and travelling home along God's highway made solely for his forgiven people; to once again live under the loving rule of God.

It is a return not to the land as they had left it, torn and ravaged by the destruction of war and the decay of neglect but to a land as fertile as the best in the region, Lebanon Carmel and Sharon.

Isaiah gives us a vision of wholeness where land and people are made new again. The land is raised from sterility to fertility and to such abundance that even the land rejoices. The people are made whole, weaknesses are strengthened, disabilities are cured, despair is banished. God is announced and He has come to save.

It is a wonderful and thrilling prediction and we as Christians know that it came to pass. God in Christ makes all things new. Christ fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies. He made the blind to see, the dumb to talk and the lame to leap and all, just like Zechariah, in tonight's New Testament reading responded in the only way possible when faced with God's overwhelming love they overflowed with joy and worship. Isaiah's prophecy, now fulfilled by the coming of Jesus has been fulfilled. It is a one time only event but thank God the cycle of renewal in the world and in our lives is constant.

After six to eight weeks the rain stops in Salalah, the streams cease to flow, the grass dies, the trees become dormant, the heat returns and the dust swirls through the quiet streets.

In our journey of faith we do not always walk alongside refreshing waters. We, like the Jewish exiles of Isaiah, spend time walking through dry places where there is often little if anything at times to nourish and sustain our faith. Cynicism, like the desert dust, can settle on us drying up the fertility of our imaginations. Tiredness and the burdens of life often make rejoicing too much effort. We cease to see the wonder of our journey only its length. Like the Jewish people we have a tendency to be prodigal, to wander down byways of our own choosing. Too often we place ourselves in self-imposed exile from God. Advent calls us to re-trace our steps and place ourselves back on the highway which Jesus by the example of His life on earth has prepared for us.

Advent is a time of anticipation and preparation; a time to shake off the dust of cynicism and anticipate walking in the refreshing rain of the love of God. It is a time to prepare to see all things new again; to follow our Lord's teaching to look at the Kingdom of God with the excitement and wonderment of a child. Only then will we experience the joy that comes from being fully refreshed.

Frederick Buechner wrote "Joy is home.... God created us in joy and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy". That is the message of Christmas.

Not all of us can move let alone sing like Gene Kelly but as Christians all of us spend Advent preparing to go singing in the God's rain at Christmas. Happy Advent and Happy Christmas!

Amen.