



A Voice Crying Out

Study Two



David Teniers the Younger: Seven Works of Mercy c1640



To whom or where do you turn to for the very latest news, and why?

1) Comfort My People

(Read Isaiah 40:1-11)

'You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
'Here is your God!'" (v9)

This is a passage about hope, comfort and the faithfulness of God, and a message God's people desperately needed to hear. They had experienced defeat, exile and loss, and it may have felt as though God had forgotten them. But the prophet announces that the time of suffering is coming to an end. 'Comfort, comfort my people' is a message that God has not abandoned them.

The picture of preparing a highway through the wilderness speaks of God making a way where there seems to be no way. The wilderness, valleys and mountains become a image of the

obstacles that stand between God and his people being removed.

Then comes the reminder that, although human life is fragile and temporary - the grass withers and the flowers fall - God's word endures. What God has promised can be trusted, even when circumstances suggest otherwise. The writer moves us from despair to hope, from uncertainty to trust, and from feeling abandoned to knowing that God holds us safely in his arms, as a shepherd with his lambs.

Discuss..

'All people are like grass' sounds bleak, but Isaiah pairs it with God's enduring word. How do those two ideas sit together for you?

The passage talks about valleys being lifted up and mountains being made low. What might those 'valleys and mountains' represent in our own lives or in the world around us?

What do you think people need to hear so as to feel comforted today? Where do we see a need for comfort in our own communities?

If the picture of God as shepherd is the one Isaiah wants us to cling to, what difference might it make to the way we approach Advent?

2) A Growing Impatience

(Read 2 Peter 3:8–15a)

'The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.' (v9)

This chapter begins by stating that Peter's aim is to stimulate them into 'wholesome thinking' and recall words spoken in the past by the prophets. But his main focus is on 'the day of the Lord' and a God who is patient, because he warns that there will always be scoffers who point a finger and question if this will ever happen.

Written at a time of growing impatience and doubt because Christ had yet to return, Peter assures them that any delay is not about absence, but mercy. God will not be rushed, and his arms are wide enough to embrace all people. But the

day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, and Peter hopes his readers will take serious note of this in the way they live their daily lives, because 'our Lord's patience means salvation'.

Living as we do in a world used to instant results (and next day deliveries) this is a useful lesson. Delay is often read as failure or absence, but here we are told that it can also be an act of patience and grace, and our waiting isn't passive but participatory – something to engage with rather than simply endure.

Discuss..

What is the difference between simply waiting for something to happen and waiting with hope?

Have you ever mistaken God's patience for God's absence? What changed your mind, if anything did?

Verse 13 speaks of 'a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.' What might a world where 'righteousness dwells' actually look like?

3) A New Beginning

(Read Mark 1:1–8)

‘a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.”’ (v3)

Mark’s Gospel opens with no manger, no genealogy, no angel choir - just a wild figure in the wilderness, dressed in camel’s hair, eating locusts, and shouting that someone greater is coming. John the Baptist’s entire ministry is pointing away from himself, because ‘the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.’ Crowds appear anyway, drawn by an announcement rather than an arrival.

John’s location was symbolic because for Israel, the desert was an image of new beginnings and renewal. It was also a place to go if you wanted to avoid persecution, being beyond the control of the city authorities. John draws the people away from Jerusalem to the place where Israel had once stood before entering the Promised Land.

Ritual immersion was a common practice, with wealthier inhabitants of Jerusalem having their own immersion pools built in their houses. It is likely that John stood in the river and blessed the crowd en masse, as they bent down into the water.



John the Baptist, Jacopo del Casentino and assistant c1330

Discuss..

Why do you think Mark chose to begin his narrative with John the Baptist rather than with Jesus’ birth? What does that tell us about the importance of preparation?

John’s message is about repentance - turning around and making a new start. Why can the word ‘repentance’ sometimes feel rather negative? How might we understand it instead as an invitation to turn towards God?

What do you notice about John’s attitude towards Jesus? What can we learn from someone who is willing to point beyond themselves rather than draw attention to themselves?

If John the Baptist were standing among us this Advent, what do you think he might be calling us to change, let go of, or make room for?

Closing Prayer

Loving God,
as we journey through Advent,
help us to wait with hope,
to listen with open hearts,
and to make room for Christ in our lives.
When we are busy, help us to be still.
When we are discouraged, renew our hope.
When we are distracted, turn our eyes towards you.
And when we see your light,
help us to share it with others.
Go with us into the week ahead.
May we carry your peace in our hearts,
your love in our actions,
and your hope in all that we do.

And a blessing -
May the God of hope fill us with joy and peace as we trust in him.
May Christ walk with us through the week ahead,
and may the light of his presence shine through us wherever we go.
Amen.

"Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her."

Henri Nouwen : *Waiting for God*