

Through Jesus, God fulfils his promises

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The other night, as often happens, I did something to annoy my wife. We have a heater in our bedroom, and the control panel sits on her bedside table. She went to bed early and left the heater on. When I finally came to bed, I snuck into the dark room, quietly as I could, with my phone light on, tiptoeing over to her side of the bed to turn the heater off.

It didn't quite go to plan. I tripped over something, bam, she woke up sharply with a yell, and I was, unsurprisingly, in the doghouse.

Sometimes in life, things happen that disrupt us; that make us sit up; that shine a light on us, and thrust us into a new way of seeing.

That's a good image to have today. Today is the second Sunday of Advent. And it's a day when the Church traditionally remembers the long line of Hebrew prophets, men like Moses and Elijah, women like Miriam and Hannah, leading up over centuries to John the Baptist.

That image, of someone bursting in and waking us up, is a good way to think about the prophets. Quite often they rocked up out of nowhere; they made a fuss; caused some chaos; very often got thrown in the doghouse. They shone a light on things. A prophet is a messenger of God; someone who reveals things about God. They speak truth to power; they call people back to God's way.

In Advent, we're in a season of waiting. We re-live the waiting of the past – the waiting of creation for the breaking in of God, for God's coming to us. As part of this waiting, the Church listens again to the voices of the Hebrew prophets, who were watching and waiting to see what God was up to.

And the reason we listen to the prophets in Advent is to remind ourselves that we are heirs to them. We're part of the same story that they were part of. It can be all too easy to think the Christian story begins in Bethlehem, two thousand years ago. But our story stretches back throughout time, to the beginning. God has always been calling his creation into relationship with him, and the coming of Jesus into the world is the culmination of that. When we listen to the Hebrew prophets, we realise we are part of this ancient story of God calling creation into relationship.

The prophets in the bible were, above all, men and women who called people to *remember*: to remember the promises God has made, and to remember who God wants them to be.

We can see this in our readings today, from Mark and Isaiah.

At the start of the Gospel of Mark there's no account of Jesus' birth, no baby in a manger. Instead we have John the Baptist, who bursts on to the scene, out of nowhere, disrupting things, causing chaos.

In his wild and hairy appearance, he's dressed like Elijah, that ancient prophet who challenged kings to turn back to God. John calls people to wake up; he shines a light in their face, trying to get them to see things they had been hiding from.

"Get ready!", he shouts. "Something is about to happen that will change everything. Remember the ancient promises God made - they are going to be fulfilled. Remember who God wants you to be. Turn back to him, be baptised, and receive his forgiveness."

What are these ancient promises of God, that John and the other prophets called people to remember?

We get an idea from our reading from the prophet Isaiah. This passage is important because the early Christians saw it as foreshadowing John the Baptist – a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. But it was also important for them because it reminded them of the promises God has made.

The Isaiah passage was likely written in a community that was suffering immensely. The people of Israel had been conquered, and many of them had been taken into captivity in Babylon. A lot of the surrounding chapters captures the feelings of grief and loss and anger they felt at their terrible situation.

But it's at this moment, at the bottom of the abyss, that we get this extraordinary passage that offers hope.

"Comfort, o comfort my people." "Make straight in the desert a highway for your God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. Here is your God!"

At the lowest point, when things seemed bleakest, the prophet Isaiah had a deep sense that God still loved his people.

Isaiah was calling the Israelites to remember the promises God made to their ancestors. They believed that God had rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. That God had brought them through the waters of the sea, through the wilderness, to a new land, and had saved them.

They believed that God had promised, and continues to promise, to be with them, to love them, to transform them.

This story is the foundation of the Jewish faith. And it's this that the prophet Isaiah called his people to remember in the time of their distress, when *they* felt in the wilderness. He's saying – "what God promised for our ancestors, God promises to do again. Turn back to him. Remember that, even in the midst of our pain, God promises to be with us, to love us, and transform us."

These are the promises that, if we listen carefully, we can hear echoed throughout the bible. They are promises that bring people hope in the midst of suffering. And they are the same promises that John the Baptist called the people to remember.

When John called people to go out into the wilderness, repent and to be baptized in the river, he was re-enacting that foundation story of the God who guided people through the wilderness and brought them through the sea to freedom. John was calling people to go through the waters of transformation; to turn away from the things that separated them from God, and be made ready to meet the one who is to come.

Because as John declared – the ancient promises of God were about to be fulfilled. The time was coming when, as Isaiah said, "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed".

But that glory would be revealed in an unexpected way. God would not send a triumphant warrior to defeat Israel's enemies, as the people were expecting. Instead, God would fulfil his promise to be with us and love us and transform us in the most scandalous way imaginable – by becoming one of us. In Jesus, God enters into the world as an ordinary person; fragile, vulnerable, as someone who will suffer. Jesus reveals what the glory of God is really like – a God who sacrifices for us, who accepts limits for us; holds nothing back for us; forgives us.

Through the coming of Jesus, God fulfils his promise to be with us and to love us.

And he fulfils his promise to transform us.

When we truly see what God does out of his love for us, we are transformed. We're freed from the bonds of guilt that hold us back. We're freed to see ourselves as God sees us, with love and forgiveness. We're given the power we need to work with him in healing the world.

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In Advent, in this time of watching and waiting, let us listen again to the prophets, who are shaking us awake, calling us to examine ourselves, to be ready for the breaking of God into creation.

Let us shine a light on ourselves; face those areas in life where we need to change, where we need to pass through the wilderness and turn back to God.

And let us remember those ancient promises God has made, throughout history, over countless generations: to be with us, to love us, to transform us. In the coming of Jesus, in Bethlehem, in our hearts now, and in the future, God's promises are being fulfilled.

Amen.