

Saying God's words



Heather Smith *reflects on* Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Christ is coming, but first someone is sent to prepare his way. Perhaps someone will act as John the Baptist for us. How often do we find a conversation with a friend or a chance encounter with a stranger prepares us for a revelation from God? When we least expect it, God has plans to speak to us, to renew our hope, to bring comfort or to illuminate our path. But knowing we may not be paying attention, or may not be ready to hear, God gently nudges us and gets our attention so we are ready. John the Baptist understood his role and his mission. Those whom God sends to prepare us may never know.

And if others prepare us for God's word, so we may also prepare others unknowingly. Always alert, we should be sensitive to God's inspiration to speak and act, because we do not know the effect it may be having on others. Or perhaps we are called to stand up for what is right, giving God's message where we recognise an injustice or wrong. We may hear the voice that says, "Cry out!" Do we have the courage to ask, "What shall I cry?" Do we have the courage to say the words that we believe God wants us to?

Our world awaits the Christ child at Christmas, but amid the joy there is much to change. 🌸

Lord, help us to hear your word for ourselves and to hear and pass it on to others. Help us to stand up for your truth where it has become lost in confusion and brokenness. Amen.

Places of the Bible

Galilee

by Caroline Fletcher

Galilee, the northern province of Israel, was where Jesus was brought up and carried out most of his ministry. It was divided into two regions: upper and lower Galilee. Nazareth, Cana, Capernaum, Nain and the Sea of Galilee, places the Bible associates closely with Jesus, were located there.

Galileans had a distinctive dialect in which certain Aramaic consonants were not enunciated clearly and this was often mocked by the southerners of Judaea. This is why bystanders at Jesus' trial spotted that Peter was Galilean and concluded that he must be a friend of Jesus, despite his attempts to go unrecognised (Matthew 26:73). Indeed, the scholar Geza Vermes claimed that Galileans were often considered stupid and unsophisticated. No wonder some Pharisees rejected Jesus with the words: "no prophet is to arise from Galilee" (John 7:52). 🌸

“A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various inessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), German pastor, theologian and anti-Nazi dissident

Advent hymns

“Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending”
(John Cennick and Charles Wesley)

by Caroline Hodgson

Charles Wesley, sometimes known as the “sweet singer of Methodism”, wrote a staggering six thousand or more hymns. “Lo! He Comes” is based on the book of Revelation and is rich with imagery of the day of judgement.

It's classic Wesley – except that Wesley didn't originally write it. A version of the hymn was first penned in 1750 by his

friend John Cennick. If anything, Cennick's version is darker: “Lo! He cometh, countless trumpets, Blow before His bloody sign!... Welcome, welcome bleeding Lamb!”

The genius of Wesley's version lies in his ability to conjure up such awesome images with visual immediacy. Singing verse one we soar heavenwards with Wesley's extravagant vision of the triumphant second coming, as though to meet the descending Messiah, before plumbing the depths in verse two (“deeply wailing”) with his depiction of Christianity's bleakest moment. The language of verse three (“dazzling... exultation... rapture... glorious scars!”) lifts us up again, while verse four brings everything together in a spine-tingling finale – “Yea, Amen, let all adore thee”. 🌸