



Advent 2

THE NEW SHOFAR

God invites all to be saved...but...

We need to respond appropriately to that invitation

God is our sure comfort in time of need

Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) begins with the comforting exhortation – *comfort my people*, words that set the message for the remainder of the work. This sets out the relationship God has with those who seek to live in the divine presence. Israel stands crushed, defeated, a people wondering if she has a future. The situation is spelled out powerfully in the Book of Lamentations with the people as though *there is no one to help!* They face a crushing darkness on their own. It is in desperation they wonder: *who helps you and comforts you Israel (Lamentations 2)*? When all is dark and a sense of hopelessness creeps in, the reply of God is there - *Here is your God, your helper, your comforter in time of need.* It is Yahweh who has comforted his people (**Isaiah 49**). But before people soak in this comfort, they need to repent, humble themselves and pray for the gift of discerning God's comforting presence in the midst of all they are enduring. Comfort is a gift on offer. It needs taking up.

The darkness in life is a consequence of sin

The sad reality was that Israel had allowed her faith to grow cold. She had been seduced by the fleshpots of the pagan world in which they were living. Instead of being a sign, a witness to the One True God, they compromised and became more like the other nations. This is precisely what God warned of when they first asked for a king to rule over them (**1 Samuel 8**). There is only the One True God.

The foundation of comforting is found in **verse 2** – *her time of service is ended, her sins are pardoned.* Her exile in Babylon is coming to an end and God is gracing her with a new beginning despite her unfaithfulness. Importantly: no repentance and forgiveness means no comfort because Israel is mired in the consequences of her sins (they are in exile) and there is no way forward. Forgiven, she can begin anew, and God will initiate a whole new Exodus back to the land of Milk and Honey, the land given to them as a heritage.

God's invitation requires a human response

Isaiah also provides us with the means of finding that *comfort*: *in the wilderness prepare the way for Yahweh.* The wilderness is what separates Israel from her home

and it is there preparations must be made to receive God. But note: this is a highway for Yahweh God. It is not a road that will take them home. It is a road that will enable them to see and experience the glory of God (verse 5), the God who will bring them back to the Promised Land. A parallel with the experience of the Hebrew people during the Exodus is clear. The glory of God is revealed in the divine saving works in human history, in the ways God intervenes in the lives of the faithful. Obstacles must be removed, anything hindering our ability to see God's glory, to experience the divine comfort must be removed from life and faithfulness restored. That is the human response. The comfort is there but are we experiencing it?

In the beginning (Genesis) – the beginning (Mark)

It is no accident Mark opens his Gospel with this word for the narratives to follow reflect a continuation of the creative and saving works of God initiated in Genesis. God has never stopped working, creating, *walking with us in the cool of the evening*.

This new revelation of God's creative love and mercy is the coming of the one who is the Christ, the Son of God. It is this Jesus who is the **Way** God comes to the peoples of the world. He is the **Way** God works in human history. There is no other way to partake of the gift of life that endures for eternity. There are many "ways" in the world around us, but only one leads to Life. That is Jesus the Christ.

This is why John the Baptist was called to prophetic ministry. It is why the message he proclaims is as clear as it is difficult – *repent*. It is not his message. It is the message God has given him to proclaim to the world. Repent!

The word in Hebrew (*shub*) has a special sense – *turn around; turn; return*. It is something for which we are responsible. It is something we are invited to undertake. How do we *repent*? In biblical language we need to *incline our hearts unto the Lord our God (Joshua 24)...**wash our heart from all wickedness (Jeremiah 4)...**break up our barren ground (Hosea 10)*. These are all parts of the demands of *repent/shub*.

Obedying this divine command grows out of a sense of our own sinfulness, from experiencing a need for forgiveness. If we are unable to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of mercy, then we will never undertake the hard work of turning.

In the New Testament Greek, the word *repent* is grounded in the idea of a change in the way we think about the things we do, about how we are living in the world, our words and our deeds. It includes a sense of regret, of sorrow but only in that these human emotions galvanise us into action. Into a transformation of the way we are living. Something has to change in the way we shape and live out our lives.

This is Advent. It is the time when we make preparations for the return of the Son of God on the clouds, his coming as judge of all peoples. No one escapes that judgment and all will be held accountable for the **Way** or *way* we have lived.

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