

*'For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight; for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rearguard.'* (Isa.52.12)

As acting Rector this will very likely be my last end-of-year address to you. I hope you will allow me to have the liberty to speak slightly longer. I have given some thoughts to what I shall speak and what text I should use. I thank God that He has given me the text in Isaiah 52.12; I want to share with you on this great verse which is very appropriate as in this worship we look back to the passing days of 2020 and look forwards to the coming days of 2021 and beyond.

But first let us ask this question: How would one describe the life of this old man Simeon when he could utter these amazing words, *'my eyes have seen your salvation.'*?

There are many ways to describe human life. Most popular among different cultures and races are these three - life is a battle, life is a voyage, and life is a march. Can you not relate Simeon's words of **Nunc Dimittis** to his life as a battle, a voyage and a march? At the conclusion of his life he is satisfied with his eyes seeing salvation.

Many writers and famous persons have spoken of life as a battle. This pandemic year we are constantly reminded by our political leaders we are fighting a war with covid-19. However, to many ordinary folks, with or without covid-19, life really feels like a real fight.

And many have spoken of life as a voyage; we are passengers in a ship across sea or lake. The architecture of many ancient churches is in the form of the Ark of Noah. One day the sea is calm but next day comes hurricane and storm. The danger is always there until the harbour lights are in sight. Buddhism certainly uses this picture. The downside of it is that it can be used as an excuse for, as a Chinese idiom puts it, 'following the current', or we may say, 'follow the trend'. The excuse: we can't control and we can't fight the storm and waves. In order to survive one must follow the current. Or in the sixties, the Communist China presenting Mao as 'the greatest helmsman' also gives the idea that life is a voyage, only Mao can be the guide to pass through all the tumults in life, and China had many then.

But I think most people prefer to describe life as a march. We like to talk about milestones of one's life journey. Even Neil Armstrong's famous saying when he stepped out on to the moon implies life is a march. Great men and women of history have shown the life-journey is a road beaten by the passing of generations gone ahead. Many poems of different cultures describe the life-journey as a march. Even many great hymns of the Christian church are written to encourage us to face up life as a march: Unfortunately, in our Australian Hymn book we drop out this famous one: *'Through the night of doubt and sorrow, Onward goes the pilgrim band, singing songs of expectation, marching to the promised land.'* My suspicion is that this great hymn had not been chosen, just like the other famous hymn, 'Onward Christian Soldiers' because it seems to depict a military warfare, which modern folks don't like it at all. Whether we like it or not, the history of humankind really shows that life is a march, our own lives also confirm it because we can indeed mark out milestones of our lives.

So as we stand in the critical moment of leaving 2020 and approaching 2021 I want to share with you how we Christians should consider that life is a march. Life is a march for Christians because, as Isaiah puts it in 52.12, God is right in the thick of it, otherwise it is useless to describe it as a march. Many writers have praised our forebears to have blazed the trail for subsequent generations. But Isaiah has a more glorious vanguard. The vanguard on our march is God, the spearhead of our life's advance. But that is not the end. Isaiah continues, God is also the rearguard. Dear brethren, as this will likely be my last end-of-year addresses, I don't think I can leave you a better saying than Isaiah's words: *The Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rearguard.*

The Lord our vanguard! Think about the past days of 2020; in fact think about all the passing years. Can't you point your fingers on place after place and say, 'God had prepared the way for me, God has always gone before me?' It is great for us today to renew our promise to God to love Him with our heart, soul, mind and strength, but why can we love Him? Is it not, as St. John puts it, 'He has always loved you first?'

At Christmas or birthdays we always like to prepare surprises for our children or loved ones. You smuggle things into house. You keep them locked away. You wouldn't tell anyone. Then on the happy morning you

bring out the thing you have prepared, a glad and loving surprise. Is it not what the heavenly Father has done for you in years gone by? And is it not that you look forward to years ahead, knowing that there will be thrill of discovery of God's surprises. All this is because God is going before us.

But life is not just full of joys. It has sorrows as well. This year, I'm afraid we tend to focus too much on the pandemic. Think of the past days and past years: there were full of frustrations and disappointments, sadness and dreams shattered. But can't you see even in those not-very-good experiences God's love was still present, even there God was going before you, with a definite plan for your life? There might be moments of sorrows so great that you were ready to give up God but then you remember these great words of St. John: *We love Him because He first loved us*. So you hold fast to Him and won't let Him go. He has always been first; He has been the Lord our vanguard.

We always think future is unknown. Therefore many people, including some Christians, look at the future with timidity and uncertainty. We may not know a great deal of future but one thing we know for sure. Whatever that future is going to bring forth, it is going to bring us God. Is not that enough for you to face the future? Whatever is hidden, one thing is certain. God is our vanguard.

Isaiah's picture of the march does not end here. His last phrase is quite astounding: *the God of Israel will be your rearguard*. Isaiah actually has a picture in mind and it is the picture of Exodus story. Israel had escaped from Egypt. They were on the way to the Promised Land. Suddenly before they crossed the Red Sea, at the rear of their march there came a terrible cry, 'The Egyptians! We are pursued!' They looked back and they could see the cloud of dust where Pharaoh's chariots and horses were approaching fast. So another cry was raised, 'The Egyptians are gaining ground, what shall we do? We are doomed!' Then came the most wonderful part of the story. '*The angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them.*' Is it not a glorious picture? God moves to the rear and fights the rearguard action. When God stands firm at the rear, no enemy can pass at all.

Dear brethren, when we look forwards to 2021 and as we think of Christian life as an onward march, it is also a rearguard action. Satan is just like the Pharaoh of the Exodus story, he will not let us go so easily to follow Christ. Never in a moment of your life think that you are already in the promised land. No, Satan will always pursue you as long as you live. At times we almost want to desert, and go over to that pursuing foe.

But remember what had happened and it will also happen to you. Remember what happened to Israel? 'The angel of God, that went before the camp' – is now the Messiah of God, 'who went before, removed and went behind.' Christ the Lord is our rearguard. Dear sisters and brothers, as we march into 2021 be assured Christ is holding the rear of our march, barring the way of Satan and all the evil forces of the world and even stopping us from desertion. Would you be in church this morning if Christ had not been our rearguard?

But it is very costly for Christ to become our rearguard. He had to give up His life to death in order to defeat Satan's weapon of death. It is from His hands and feet sorrow and love mingled down the cross. It is because Christ has defeated death He is now able to defend us from all assaults including our own death.

What a comforting thought as we march on to 2021 and beyond: Christ is facing backwards down the road you have travelled. His hands, stretched out, just like the time He stretched out on the cross, to bar the way of all our enemies that intend to hurt our body, mind and soul. Let us give thanks to the blessed Christ. He is our rearguard.

Whatever milestones of the year you have gone through, and before we arrive at the city of God, remember what drives us to march on is God Himself. He is our vanguard. He is also our rearguard. Praise to Him forever.