

Wesley Ebenezer pastoral letter  
For the second week in Advent, 2020  
This is MASSIVE!

Dear sisters and brothers,

It's a strange thing, I have felt very blessed to be able to write a weekly letter of hope and encouragement to you. Advent is a season that I have not always felt positive about. I've sometimes preached and not really got hold of the good news for myself. And here we are in the midst of very confusing and difficult times. Many of us are separated from our loved ones. We've been ill; we've been through isolation (which can feel like a punishment, can't it?); some of us have lost our jobs and some of us have lost our pensions. We've lost touch with friends and we've been bereaved.

But here is the Good News! The tinsel and the "Black Friday" sales and the Brexit negotiations are not the main news for Christians in Advent. Our news last week was the Joy that God finds in his created world and the Joy that He finds in loving us and in sharing our lives.

This week's reading from Isaiah the prophet's book takes us back about 2,700 years ago to a message God sent to his people, the Israelites. They were in a pretty hopeless situation. Half of their people had been carried off as slaves to a distant country. The other half were under threat from other warring nations. Their king Hezekiah fell ill and prayed for himself and his people. God heard his prayer and sent a message through Isaiah the prophet, who incidentally healed king Hezekiah's open sores with mashed figs. (But don't try this at home please!).

God's message to the Israelites is a message of hope and encouragement, but it's more than that! It's massive! When God speaks to them in that time, He also speaks to us, particularly when we feel very discouraged and afraid, and when we begin to lose faith in God. (If this is speaking to you at this time, give thanks for his message of comfort. Remember that God's Word is timeless.)

Isaiah, chapter 40, vv 1 to 11.

***Encourage God's people***

*Our God has said: "Encourage my people! Give them comfort!  
Speak kindly to Jerusalem and announce:  
Your slavery is past; your punishment is over.  
I, the Lord, made you pay double for your sins."*

*Someone is shouting:  
"Clear a path in the desert! Make a straight road for the LORD our God.  
Fill in the valleys; flatten every hill and mountain.  
Level the rough and rugged ground.  
Then the glory of the LORD will appear for all to see.  
The LORD has promised this!"*

*Someone told me to shout, and I asked,  
"What should I shout?"*

*We humans are merely grass, and we last no longer than wild flowers.  
At the LORD's command, flowers and grass disappear, and so do we.  
Flowers and grass fade away, but what our God has said will never change.  
**Your God is Here!***

*There is good news for the city of Zion. Shout it as loud as you can from the highest  
mountain! Don't be afraid to shout to the town of Sheffield!*

*"Your God is here!" Look!*

*The powerful LORD God is coming to rule with his mighty arm. He brings with him what  
he has taken in war, and he rewards his people.*

*The LORD cares for his nation, just as shepherds care for their flocks.*

*He carries the lambs in his arms, while gently leading the mother sheep."*

*(Contemporary English Version, 1999)*

Just to keep you on your toes, if anyone notices a deliberate mistake in this reading, let me know and I'll send you a small prize.

The message I take from this Old Testament reading is that GOD is above time and is present everywhere and in all time, so his Word speaks to me in our current times of, (let's face it) sometimes hopelessness and despair. Our GOD is here now present with us in these really painful and frightening times. He is MASSIVE!

What can we do? We can share the Good News, because we believe it. Don't tell me you can't be kind to strangers. Don't tell me you aren't already doing those little neighbourly things for your neighbours. Do what you can. Sometimes the best thing you can do is to pray for people. Our grandchildren go to a primary school that has strong links with the local Anglican church. We recently revived the prayer group for parents and relatives of the children who attend. We have sent in Christmas food treats for the staff and school workers, thanking them for their loving kindness to our children and letting them know that we are praying for them and their families. It's only a small thing, but it's MASSIVE!

If anyone is a fan of Handel's "Messiah", my top tip for an emotional moment is the opening aria from the tenor: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." Better still, watch it on "You Tube" to see the tenor's face as he sings, and be comforted.

It was a man called W.B. Fitzgerald, the founder of the Wesley Guild, who said:

*"All need to be saved.*

*All may be saved.*

*All may know themselves saved.*

*All may be saved to the uttermost."*

As I write this, there's snow on the hills. Be careful outside and let's pray for each other this week, that we may know that God speaks to us if we will only listen. And it's massively Good News!

Let me know if you want to have a word!

With every blessing, Sue Stanworth (07989 533075).