The readings today have to be some of the best in the church’s year. The ringing tones of Isaiah – although I can’t help thinking of them being read by some slightly wizened old canon in King’s College Chapel, wheezing out, ‘Cwy – what shall I cwy’. And the excitement of Mark – ‘the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’ … now that’s a story worth buying the paper for.

They are readings about promise. Not about threat – about promise – about God coming with heart rushing, pulse racing deliverance for his people – his people, conceived just as the Jewish nation in the days of Isaiah, broadening amazingly by the days of Jesus Christ to the entire human family. And to you, and to me – to this city – this nation – this world.

God is coming. He is here, of course – he’s always here …. but he is also coming afresh. (Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.) What do you want him to bring? What is your Advent hope? What is the Advent hope of the city, of the world?

• If you could prayer one prayer for this city, what would it be?

• If you could pray one prayer for this world, what would it be?

• If you could pray one prayer for yourself, what would it be?

Now I want to ask you – what part can you play in the answering of your own prayer? Don’t misunderstand me – this is not to down play the real action of God in the world – but it is to recognise that he uses us! He uses us to make his coming known, his deliverance real! He sends you and me with practical acts of service, with verbal expressions of love and compassion.

I’ve spotted a whole series of things in these readings today, which have really electrified me. I love the start of the Isaiah passage – Comfort, Comfort ye my people. I wonder what springs to mind for you as you put the opening line of the Isaiah passage with the final line of the Mark – and its reference to the Holy Spirit? Jesus promised to send us the Holy Spirit, the Comforter – the same Holy Spirit who was promised to the God’s people in exile now comes to us day by day, here in Coventry. But this comfort – you may remember me saying at Pentecost – is no simple cuddly warm blanket. It’s the comfort which drives us back into service for the sake of God. The Holy Spirit, whose action in powerful deliverance is promised in both Isaiah and in the gospel – is the Spirit who directs and empowers God’s people to live their lives in free obedience to his calling. Read the wonders of Isaiah 40 again, and see in it a description of the work of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who brought Jesus to birth, and brings his salvation right into our hearts and minds, into our families and our lives, into our world.

...
How should we do that, do you think? Well, at that point, our minds may go to the man with sandwich board proclaiming – shouting, threatening - ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is nigh’ – with many dire words of warning. (cf Mishael’s words.) But actually, the words of Isaiah promise a God who will come to feed his flocks like a shepherd, who will gather lambs in his arms and gently lead the mother sheep.

As we move to the Gospel reading – although we know that in later passages, John’s words were fiercely critical, even threatening, here at the beginning of his ministry, I wonder ...Did he scare them into the Kingdom, or attract them? Repent, for the Kingdom of God is nigh has always sounded very negative. But what if he was so positive about the future, that people wanted to be as ready as possible. A bit like having a bath before going out to an amazing dinner. not because you are focussing on how dirty you are, but because you are thinking about how wonderful the evening ahead is going to be, and you want to be as ready as possible for it?

Something is coming that is far beyond anything that you have experienced! Are you ready? Get ready - offer your whole life to God so that you can really be part of it.

There are so many ways to make a message known – but letting people know, focussing on how wonderful and amazing Jesus is, rather than how bad and awful they are, is, I think, a better way of getting people’s attention.

I found myself reminded this week of last year’s Christmas Eve Service, ‘The Form of a Servant’. I think it was the mention of Camel Hair – another wonderfully surprising juxtaposition from the readings. In the gospel, a camel hair coat is, I think, a sign of uncouth poverty. Today, of course, the opposite is true – and at last year’s service on Christmas Eve a distinguished guest in the congregation, wearing just such a coat, was sitting just a few yards from the Bishop as he ceremonially removed his rich vestments following the example of Jesus who, though he was in the form of God humbled himself, taking the form of a servant .... The making real the message and ministry of Jesus in the way that we are with one another is a more powerful tool of communication than any amount of street corner shouting in condemnation.

God is coming to us afresh, in the person of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Will you allow yourself to be baptised with the Holy Spirit, in the Holy Spirit – both readings of that last verse of the gospel are possible? To be so overwhelmed by the power and reality of God’s salvation that it lives in you and transforms not only your life, but the lives of those around you – and, as flame gets joined to flame, transforms this city, this world? You are now the agent of God’s deliverance! It’s not your power, your fire – but fire needs something to burn, and that’s you and me. (A reconciled and reconciling people – revealing the power of God’s salvation here in the city, here in the world.)

What might it look like for this cathedral to burn with the power of the Holy Spirit? For our relationships to be so alive with the possibilities of God, that others would long to be part of it? For our sense of God’s call upon us to be so strong that it would command our very selves, and all that we could give to it? For us to be such a bright and transforming presence in the midst of the city – and indeed the world – that people would ask, ‘what do I need to do, to be part of that?’

This is a world that cries out for the deliverance that Christ brings – that cries out for God’s comfort, for his good news, for his Holy Spirit. Our task is to be part of God’s gift to the world, as we receive those things within our own lives, ready to share them with others.

- If you could prayer one prayer for this city, what would it be?
- If you could pray one prayer for this world, what would it be?
- If you could pray one prayer for yourself, what would it be?

What’s God’s prayer for you – what is he hoping to do, long to do, in you & through you? What’s his Advent hope?

Amen.