

**The Glory of Yahweh and the misery of man**  
**Sermon 6 December 2008**  
**Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8**

Last week I read a story in a Dutch newspaper. One gentleman, in the Dutch city of Rotterdam, bit off the ear of his girl friend; he then decided to jump from the 20<sup>th</sup> floor of his flat building, sick of himself, sick of life.

His plans went well until he hit the ground, where he only broke his arm; beside this, he was all right. In hospital they set his arm, and he was arrested for the abuse of his girlfriend. How desperate must that man be – he cannot even jump well?

The media are full of news that is the result of despair, and full of reasons for despair as well.

Worldwide people suffer from poverty, corruption, oppressive religions, dictatorship, with not much hope of better days. But let us today not look at those external reasons for misery, or at others. Looking into our own families, our work, our life, is good enough reason for having a sense that something is awfully wrong.

We often experience life as a dry desert. Even when our circumstances are fine we often walk around with heartaches. Our unhappiness is not only a matter of circumstances, but something deeper, inside us.

According to the French writer Blaise Pascal, in his *Pensees*, we avoid this honesty by our busyness:

Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, and emptiness. And at once, there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, resentment, despair.

What hope is there for us, in moments when we feel low and helpless?

Advent is very much the season in Church life when we focus on the hope that God offers to us, people living in the desert of life.

It is not very fashionable for us to admit that we live in a spiritual desert, and that we suffer from all sorts of ailments of the heart; we usually prefer to walk on, but how do you do that if you have no hope in your heart... Just deny the problems? Act as if all is well?

God is the Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort, St Paul writes to the Church in Corinth. So to admit that we *are* in a desert may actually open ourselves up for experiencing this comforting presence of God.

Because it is in His nature to offer comfort, God acted when Israel was in need in Babylon, living far away from its own land. They had been led away as captives to Babylon.

Not all were led away; some had been allowed to stay behind in Israel; they lived in despondency as well. Their cities were destroyed. Jerusalem was ruled over by pagan Babylonians, and worst of all, the Temple of God had been destroyed. God was no longer in the land. Their fruitful land had become a desert for the people.

Israel now lived in the midst of strange people, with strange gods and habits. And they deserved this fate, many prophets had told them, because the nation had pushed God to the sidelines of life.

Since they had clearly failed to be God's people, did they have a future? Would God again work in their midst, or had He abandoned them? Could God act? Where is God when we need Him so badly?

The Bible takes our problems seriously; it doesn't dress them up. What good would it have been for the prophets to explain to the Israelites that exile was nothing at all, that slavery to a foreign power was just a different sort of life and they'd get used to it, that they could find God's glory just as well in the shadowlands of Babylon?

Israel had a real problem, just as many of us have serious problems that deserve to be taken seriously. And in Israel's time of real crisis, God spoke to his people, offering hope.

Yes, indeed, life is a desert: you people are like grass, withering away in the heat of the day. Your lives are like flowers fading away. There is enough reason to be depressed about reality.

But the word of our God will stand forever; what He has promised long ago will soon be fulfilled, Isaiah told the nation.

God had promised Israel life in shalom in their own land with the Lord God in their midst; this Word of God, this promise, stands forever, Isaiah says. So boldly he announced better times, a new day:

Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term and that her penalty is paid.

He promised a new start, and the core of the promise, was that God himself would be in their midst again:

The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

Jerusalem is told to not fear for:

Here is your God, coming with might and as a tender shepherd who will feed his flock.

What a lovely promise for anyone who is in great need. God can change our lives, as He is powerful, and He will do it, for He is a loving shepherd.

When Isaiah addresses Israel in Babylon, he suggests that God offers them a new Exodus. Israel looked back to its Exodus from Egypt into their promised land, but now, to people who feel far away from home, and whose hearts are homeless, God promises a new Exodus.

This is suggested by the words about *the way in the wilderness that must be prepared*; this highway for God is obviously the way back to Israel.

The idea of a new Exodus is also suggested by the words that *the Glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and that all people shall see it*. The Glory of the LORD, Israel remembered, was in the first place the presence of God in the column of fire and smoke that guided the nation through the desert like a shepherd.

This column of fire and smoke descended on the tent of God, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Later, it rested on the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. But the Temple was destroyed; the Ark had been stolen, and God's Glory was no longer with Israel.

But now, God promises that the desert in which they lived, would become the route for their return to a new life, and also that He would be present with the people again, both in their desert, and in the new life to come.

Israel *did* return again to its land. Babylon fell, in 539 before Christ, to the invading armies of the Persian King Cyrus. During his first year as ruler of Babylon, Cyrus allowed 200,000 Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem. They rebuilt some of their cities, and most important, the Temple in Jerusalem.

But about 560 years later, at the time of John the Baptist, Israel was still miserable. The Glory of the Lord had *not* returned to the Temple; Roman foreigners ruled the nation, sin, misery, problems and fear had not disappeared.

Where is God? It seemed God had only fulfilled part of his promises. They had their land, but so what, God was not there! The heart was still empty.

How does it help us, today, to have our assets, our real estate, our jobs, how does it help us to have everything organized quite well, if we still experience life as a desert journey? If we miss the *shalom*, the peace of God in our life? The French writer Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensees*:

Nothing could be more wretched than to be intolerably depressed as soon as one is reduced to introspection...

Israel looked inside and asked: Where is God? As a result, different movements sprung up, trying to answer those questions.

There were the **Sadducees**, who told the people to lead a good life, enjoy it, and not worry too much: *'What we have is all there is... Learn to live with your pain.'*

There were the **Essenes**, a sort of monks, who withdrew from society to create the perfect life in their sectarian seclusion: *'Yes, circumstances in life are awful, but God will bless us in our soul and in our small happy community, let us forget about the external circumstances...'*

There were **Zealots**, radical political groups trying to clean the land from the evil Roman occupation. *'If only we kick the Romans out, then God will return to the land...'*

Very strong at the time of John the Baptist was also the movement of the **Pharisees**; they argued that only the most radical adherence to all the laws of God would bring God back to the nation. They tried to educate all people to live in line with all the laws of God and a few more. *'If only we were better people, then God would bless us again...'*

In the midst of Israel's predicament, in a time of moral and political confusion, when many people were without hope, John the Baptist stood up.

It is noteworthy to see that John's work is situated in the desert and at the Jordan River. Again, we see *a voice crying in the desert, to prepare the way of the Lord.*

This helps us realize that John the Baptist proclaimed the same comfort to the nation of Israel as Isaiah had done. It also shows that what Isaiah had promised, had not been fulfilled yet. John the Baptist did not need to explain this; the people knew it from their own experience.

Even if all circumstances in our lives are fine, the absence of God will still leave us with a heartache that only He can solve.

For people who would love to bite off their girlfriend's ear, who would like to end the misery of their life, and for people with a less dramatic desire for change like most of us, the preaching of John in the desert points to the *real* Exodus, and the beginning of our hope for the arrival of God himself.

In Isaiah, we saw the promise that the Lord God Himself would come to be in the midst of His people, as the source of salvation, comfort, and peace. Let me repeat some words:

The way in the desert was the way of the LORD, of Jahweh. (vs. 3)

A highway had to be made for our God, for Elohim. (vs. 3)

Here is our God, Elohim, had to be announced to the cities of Judah and Jerusalem. (vs. 9)

The sovereign LORD, Jahweh Elohim, is the one who is coming with power (vs. 10)

The Lord God, creator of heaven and earth, was expected to come and to be in the midst of the nation, for Him a highway had to be prepared; this is what Isaiah announced.

Then John came and proclaimed that this highway had to be prepared, for God was now, finally, coming.

The presence of the Lord God, nothing less, is what John promises, exactly like Isaiah. And what did he do? He pointed to Jesus, the one who was coming, and called Him more powerful, and that He would give people the Spirit of God.

In the Old Testament, the expectation was that the Lord God would come with might and tenderness; in the New Testament, we see that the one who came is Jesus Christ.

There was no doubt for the early Church that the coming of Jesus Christ was what had been promised in the Old Testament, the coming of the Lord God. That is why Mark opens his Gospel with calling Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Mark the evangelist and John the Baptist apply these Old Testament verses about Jahweh Elohim, the Lord God, to Jesus of Nazareth.

John says: The one more powerful than I am, will baptize people with the Spirit of God. That means: He will give to the people of God the presence of the Glory of God.

Lord Jesus Christ is the appearance of the glory of God in the midst of Israel. Paul would later speak of *the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*.

God has sent his comfort; He has come in glory. Where? When? How? Look at Jesus...

We need God's comfort? We need His presence in our desert-life? Let us go to Jesus...

Not only does Scripture link Jesus firmly with the Glory of God, but it also links Him with the Exodus Isaiah promised as the hope for the world.

You recall the scene in the gospels about Jesus on a mountain, where Moses and Elijah appear. Jesus appeared in his Glory – his clothes became as bright as lightning.

When Moses and Elijah appeared, they spoke with Jesus about his *departure*, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. His *departure*: his death, resurrection and ascension.

The Greek word used for *his departure* here is literally: *his exodus*. For the writers of the New Testament, Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension were the *true* exodus as promised by God: Jesus leads all mankind from sin, misery, hopelessness, into a life where God is present.

So the *motifs* of the Exodus and of the Glory of God find their full expression in Jesus Christ.

The desert where John preached was a place of preparation for the final act of God in history, and that final act was God's entrance into our history, into our lives, through Jesus Christ.

He is with us in our desert-trip of life as the comforting cloud of smoke and fire; God does not leave us alone. Even in the midst of the desert He offers us the foretaste of the life to come in His full presence.

What a comfort! He is near us, with us, around us, in us. We find Him again and again to be our hope and comfort for every day, even in the midst of dryness.

Yes we go through many times of wilderness in our life, and those times are real and rough. But they do not need to be the end of our hopes; the vacuum that misery creates in our heart, is so perfectly filled by the presence of Jesus Christ.

He is God with us, in our sufferings, in our pain.

May I suggest that we use this period of Advent, to not deny our hurts, our troubles, but to be frank about them?

Confessing our sins, admitting our problems and emptiness, even if only to God, is our highway in the desert to experiencing the presence of God and the comfort we need.

Instead of denial, it is much better to pray:

Lord God, you came to our dark world in Jesus Christ.  
You are our Savior, our Shepherd, our Comfort, our Hope.  
You know our humanness, our needs, the issues we walk around with.  
Please come again Lord into my problematic life, and  
Lift me up.  
Comfort me.  
Encourage me - With your presence Lord.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.