

Keep calm and carry on

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Isaiah 40:1-11

Ps 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15

Mark 1:1-8



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

When I was moving down here to Christchurch, someone gave me this packet of tissues: Keep calm and carry on, no doubt thinking I would be experiencing a quake or two. I remember seeing 'Keep calm and carry on' on a poster in the Bishop's office at St Peter's Hall. It was only in July 2016 that the Diocese removed 'Keep calm and carry on' as the strapline from its flyer advertising vacancies in the Diocese, I guess with the assumption that calmness was one of the prime qualities needed in post-quake Christchurch, or perhaps we could reframe it as bloody-minded determination not to let things beat us!

Some of you will perhaps remember "Keep calm and carry on" being used in its original 2nd World War context - a bracing call to keep on doing your duty, doing your bit, whatever happens, through blood, sweat, toil and tears. But "Keep calm and carry on" does not have a lot of comfort to it. It's more a dogged determination, a stiff upper lip, stoic 'keep on keeping on' which tends toward the fatalistic in admitting that maybe things are not going to get much better any time soon.

And perhaps as we look to the new year, as our new government beds in and rapidly gets past the honeymoon stage; as we look at our world with, so much tension around nuclear threats, great powers and rogue states, unstable leaders on the world stage...Just where do we find comfort, reassurance, Advent hope?

Perhaps that is why there is such huge winsome appeal in the well-loved words of **Isaiah 40**: Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God. These words were first addressed to God's people who were supremely dis-comforted at finding their city of Jerusalem destroyed and themselves taken into exile in Babylon. For seventy years they had 'kept calm and carried on' in their place of exile, and only now came the words of promise, of hope, announcing the coming of the Lord to restore God's people to their land, and most of all restoring them to covenant relationship - comfort **my people** says **your God**. You will be **my people** and I will be **your God**.

This prophecy of Isaiah is then reapplied in our **Gospel** reading to John the Baptist, as the one who in his day will announce the coming of the Lord, the Messiah, to restore the people who have long been in exile from God's ways, through 400 years of prophetic silence, calling them back into right relationship with God.

But probably the last thing we would say of John the Baptist's message is that it is comfortable. He made people very **uncomfortable** - perhaps in our urban context we might see him as a streetie, or one of those alternative characters who ask us uncomfortable questions about our lifestyle, and pose challenges to ways of living and thinking which we have grown comfortable with.

Such "John the Baptist" figures also exist within the church, or often on the edge of it, or even pushed out of it, yet they still feel compelled to speak out. And just as there is so often a tension between the institutional church and the prophetic figures who challenge it, so there can also be a symbiosis, a living alongside each other, with mutual benefit, challenge and support, if we are willing to learn from each other, not always easy! So, uncomfortable as they are, there is a place for the John the Baptist figures, the prophets in our midst.

The writer Flannery O'Connor¹ speaks of writing in prophetic terms: the writer's work is the call, not to comfort, but to reality. She says this:

"Art [and we could add, faith] requires a delicate adjustment of the *outer* and *inner* worlds, in such a way that, without changing their nature, they can be seen through each other. To know oneself is to know one's region.

It is also to know the world and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from that world. To know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks.

It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way round."

John the Baptist is just such a prophet who dares to speak the Truth, God's Truth, and calls people to make God's paths straight, to align ourselves with God's straight ways, to get rid of our crookedness, our ability to bend the truth, to warp it and distort it into half-truths and shadows of the truth.

In a world of fake news and alternative facts, we know all about it!

Of course John doesn't pull any punches, he's a straight talker too. His is the straight talk of urgency, of clear sighted vision of what needs doing, the sort of clear direction that is needed in a crisis or emergency.

Flannery O'Connor writes again: "When you can assume your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use the normal means of talking to it; [but] when you have to assume that it does *not [hold your beliefs]*, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock - to the hard of hearing, you shout, and for the almost-blind, you draw large and startling figures."

¹ Flannery O'Connor, 'The Fiction Writer and his Country', *Mystery and Manners*, 34-35.

So John doesn't hesitate to call his audience a brood of vipers (Luke 3:7). But once he's got their attention, he encourages them back into God's sphere of love and holiness, shows them the way back through baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. He doesn't just rant at them, he shows them a way to turn from the shadows to face the light of God's truth, to face the light of the coming Christ, who will embody God's truth. He sees not only their sinful state, but also their potential to turn back to God, and he helps them do that through a powerful ritual of washing and cleansing which we still enact today - baptism.

And John promises even more - "I have baptised you with water, but the one who is to come will baptise you with the Holy Spirit", the very Spirit of God given to us that God might dwell in us and with us.

So John's message though initially uncomfortable and challenging, yet is finally a message of hope and truth. In a world of so many pseudo and false messages, of virtual reality and contrived and manufactured truths, there is actually a kind of bracing comfort in hearing the truth, the real deal.

It can actually be a deep relief not to have to maintain a façade that all is well when we know it's not, not to need to 'keep calm and carry on', not to pretend to a competence we don't in fact possess, but to admit that all is not well, that we can't always cope alone and that we need help. It's not something we independent DIY Kiwis find easy, but hitting the wall, hitting rock bottom, is often the first step towards looking up, reaching out and receiving the help we need, and finding the way forward into new life, new hope, real change, and new community.

Many have spoken of this in Christchurch during the quakes, of the growth of neighbourliness, of new relationships of trust and friendship, of learning to rely again on other people, to build bridges rather than live behind fences. The sad reality is that it often takes a crisis, an emergency, a wake-up call, for us to do this, and how easy it is to revert to a façade of "I've got it all together" independence and self-sufficiency.

Advent is just such a wake-up call, a time of being real, of taking off our masks and stripping down to basics, getting into desert wear if you like, just when the world is over-dressing and over-decorating. It's profoundly counter-cultural, Advent, isn't it! We are trying to listen for the voice of God's truth, midst the myriad of voices of false bonhomie that assail us at this time of year, voices which offer only momentary comfort, short-lived gratification, promises that won't last into the new year.

God's truth provides the compass point that orients us again, midst so many competing forces that would sway us out of plumb. It provides the fulcrum point against which we can evaluate all other truths, all other news flashes, or soundbytes or canned carols that we hear in a day.

The Advent call to repent is well explained in the words of Frederick Buechner: "Biblically speaking, to repent doesn't mean to feel sorry about, to regret. It means to turn around 180 degrees.

To undergo a complete change of mind, heart, direction.

Turn away from madness, cruelty, shallowness.

Turn toward the tolerance, compassion, sanity, hope, justice that we all have in us at our best."

This is the way to bring to life a beautiful picture of hope for God's world expressed in today's Psalm 85: I want to conclude with a few verses where it speaks of a world where the coming of God means this:

"mercy and faithfulness have met together,

Justice and peace have embraced each other.

Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,

And righteousness will look down from heaven.

Justice shall go before you,

And the path before your feet shall be peace."

Let's pray for that world, let's commit to live into that world this Advent, and into the new year ahead. Amen.

(much of this sermon was adapted from a sermon by Deborah Meister, St Alban's, Washington DC, in 'Expository Times' vol 123, number 2, November 2011)