

A parent tenderly picks up a small child who has bumped its head against something or fallen and skinned its knee and holding it close whispers words of comfort and assurance, perhaps even kissing “the owie to make it feel better.” A physician, or other medical professional, lays a comforting hand on the hand or shoulder of a patient who is anxious about a forthcoming medical procedure or who has just been given a serious, perhaps terminal, diagnosis assuring them that they do not face the journey alone as they say: “I”, or “we’ll take good care of you.” A member of the clergy, a neighbor, a friend, quietly sits and attentively listens to someone pour out their burdensome story perhaps also holding them in an embrace as streams of tears gush forth from the other’s eyes at some loss in their life, being for the afflicted one a pillar of strength. All of these are examples of the comfort and consolation at the heart of today’s liturgy.

If we listened closely as today’s gospel was proclaimed it was introduced in a slightly different way than usual. Rather than the usual: “a reading from the holy Gospel according to” we heard instead: “a reading from the beginning of the holy Gospel according to Mark.” This is more than just another change in the liturgy! Something more is present here than just a recording of historical events or pious reminiscences about Jesus. No, this is the good news, the gospel, of Jesus Christ the Son of God. What is being announced is a new and definitive beginning of God’s presence and involvement in our world and our lives. To the people of the middle of the first century of Christian era who were facing difficulty and persecution for their faith in Jesus, as well as to us today who face struggles and temptations of many kinds in our lives of faith, Mark is telling us God has not forgotten or abandoned us; is not deaf to our cries; callous to our fears. Like the parent sweeping up the child, the medical professional offering a reassuring hand, the minister of the church, the neighbor, the friend standing with another in their time of need—so too God is with us. That, after all, is the meaning of the name “Emmanuel” whose coming we pray for in a special way in this season of Advent.

When Mark wanted to find just the right way to express the nature and purpose of his account of the person and life of Jesus and its meaning, that in him something new, something unprecedented was happening, that history had turned a corner, he turned to that part of the book of the prophet Isaiah we today call “Second-Isaiah”. Written as the Hebrew people were about to return home to their native land after undergoing the trials and sufferings of fifty years of exile in Babylon a little over four-and-a-half centuries before the birth of Jesus, this section of Isaiah is known as the “Book of Consolation.”

In today’s first reading from Isaiah made famous by George Frederick Handel in his aria, *The Messiah* we hear God instruct the prophet to speak these words on God’s behalf: “Comfort, give comfort to my people. ...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem that her service (the period of exile and estrangement from God) is ended, her guilt (sin) is expiated (forgiven)”(Isa.40:1,2). Later in this same passage we hear God portrayed “like a shepherd (who) feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care” (Isa.40:11). The initiative is God’s. Here is a God who will clear any winding way, level any mountain, smooth out any rough path in order that the gift of his grace might find a dwelling within anyone who opens their heart to him. It is this call of conversion, of turning to God, of allowing God to pick us up and hold us close that John the Baptist invites us to today as he points the way to God’s soon to once again be poured out gift of Jesus.

Today our lives are very much like the people to whom Isaiah and Mark wrote their message. A political system stymied by partisan bickering while many suffer; an economy that has left many unemployed, underemployed, or anxious as to when their job may be next on the “chopping block” and its consequences personally and for their family and their way of life; divorce or other family tensions; illnesses of various kinds, other stresses and tensions of daily life that leave us feeling drained of energy and hope, “skinned up”, broken, anxious, fearful. To us today Jesus comes once again in this Mass, in a special way also in this afternoon’s and season’s celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in which we can “lay our burdens down” and in the daily care and concern of others; in all of these Jesus is here and speaks his word of comfort and consolation, assuring us we have not been abandoned, are not alone, that he is truly Advent’s promise fulfilled: Emmanuel, God with us.