

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

When you think about it, it's an extraordinary thing that the fulfillment of God's plan for the world does not depend on whether or not human beings are able to get things right. Sometimes we do, and sometimes we have the intention to get things right, and then fail miserably. I doubt there are many people who get married thinking, well, may this be the first of many. After all, you make vows before God to stay together, so the intention is the right one, but then further down the line things get messed up and you get divorced.

And there are times when things go wrong, because people deliberately set out to get things wrong. Like the people who steal money from their church or workplace which then closes or goes out of business. Or when you make a fraudulent insurance claim, which means everyone else's premiums have to go up. Or if you make a promise you know you are not going to keep. The person who is waiting for you to make good on your promise, then feels let down.

If you mark human life and history closely, there are probably more zeros than heroes. We like to remember the good aspects of human striving - prosperity, equality, long and happy marriages - but in fact the true picture is often more shaded. Things can go badly wrong, and it is usually ourselves who are to blame. Actually, I happen to think that things could be much worse: in life we experience a lot of close calls. Fortunately human beings have the capacity to learn from their mistakes, and that is the key to survival.

But what lessons are we learning? If, for example, you spent your life in the pursuit of health, happiness, and prosperity, without once stopping to think about God, I think that you would be lucky to get through life without being experiencing some serious tragedy, hardship, or misfortune. That's not because God gives the godless more trouble. Where misfortune is concerned, God shows no partiality. Jesus says, it rains on the good and the bad alike. But there's a difference between experiencing life's hardships when you are a believer and when you are not. Without God in your life, you can easily become bitter and disillusioned. With God in your life, your failures are less important because God, despite everything, still loves and cares for you. He is your present help in time of trouble.

We can take comfort from the fact that God's plan for the world, which includes us as individuals, does not depend upon how well we perform, or whether or not we are able to achieve our own goals of health, happiness and prosperity. The secret to life is to discern what God is doing behind the scenes: what is God's plan for the world? What is God's plan for you? How do these plans overlap?

We can only know if we listen to what God is saying. Therefore, let us turn again to our readings this morning, and hear what God is saying. God speaks to us through the words of the prophet Isaiah. "Comfort, O comfort my people". How reassuring to know that God wants to comfort us; that God sees our tribulation, our failures, our sinfulness and wants to reassure us that everything will be all right. Despite our not being able to get things right, or perhaps

because of it, God does not abandon us. Like a mother to her children, God seeks to comfort us.

God also wants us to learn. The mistakes of the past do not need to determine our future course. God wants us to know that the word of the Lord will stand forever. The word of truth, love and mercy can be our guiding light as we travel on. A moment ago I said that God was like a mother who comforts her children. I want to set before you another image: that of a shepherd who tends his sheep. You know, the earliest painting of Christ was not of a crucifixion, but of a shepherd. Christ is carrying a sheep on his shoulders. The Lord is our shepherd, the one who rescues us.

So what does God want us to learn in the current time? The lessons for us to learn are not that different from what people were hearing in the deserts of Judea. The eternal word of God speaks to us, as it always has, through the word of the prophets, through the voice of someone like John the Baptist, who “appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance.” John has come to prepare the way of the Lord by calling people to repent of their sins and be cleansed through the ritual of baptism.

It had been many centuries since the people had seen a prophet like John, but they recognized him as genuine and went out to him in the desert to be baptized. John avoids the places of influence and power so that he will not be corrupted by the temptations and falsehoods of the world. In the wilderness, your comfort and strength is God alone. God speaks through John, who humbly declares, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”

In our Christian story we have two early models of discipleship, that of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and that of John the Baptist. In both we see the essential quality of humility. Consider John, who was a great prophet, who spoke eloquently and convincingly, even to his captors after he was arrested. John had his own disciples and followers. If he had any pride at all, he could have set himself up as a rival to Jesus. Fortunately, John was humble and wise enough to know God’s plan, and his own place in that plan: it wasn’t for John to lead people to the new city, to the new Jerusalem. John was not the Savior. It was God’s plan for John to prepare the way for the Savior, for the one who was to come.

In the dawn, John is the first ray of the new rising sun which will scatter the darkness of the world. John will call people to repent and to be baptized with water. But the one who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit. God’s plan is becoming clear: soon God will come like a shepherd to rescue his people, and the power of the Holy Spirit will be directed through the life and teaching of the one who is to come. Who is that? The opening sentence of the gospel of Mark tells us right from the start: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

In the darkness, the light breaks forth. God will speak through John to prepare the people for the Savior, the Redeemer of the world. John’s message is not only what he says, but who he is: someone who has chosen to serve God and no other. Someone committed to telling the truth, even at the risk to his own life. John had no capacity to deceive or flatter, or to pretend to be anything else than who he was. He chose to serve God without reservation,

unconditionally. Again, we see the comparison with Mary. Both put their absolute trust and faith in God.

God's plan for the world should be clear to us now. The story is told in our Bibles and written in our hearts. God saves. Jesus reaches out to us in our confusion and our sinfulness, and longs to comfort us as a mother comforts her children. And in this crazy old world it is Jesus who can put things right, because his power comes from God, his word is true, and his love is immense.

The first stage in putting things right in our own life is to allow Jesus to enter in, and what a comfort and joy that is! Because God has a plan for you, believe it or not, which forms part of his plan for the world. God is slowly and carefully putting things right, but God needs helpers like Mary and John the Baptist. God spoke through John when John called people to repent. That is the second stage of putting things right, to hear God's word and act on it.

The next stage is to learn what God's plan is for you. Ask God to reveal it to you. Learn to pray, and learn to listen. God can speak in a clear voice like John's, but he can also speak quietly, and the art of Christian living is to be attuned to what God is saying.

Today, however, his message is loud and clear, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." Make yourself ready for the one who is to come. Keep alert. Keep awake.

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

Father David Beresford