

St Andrews Tide leaflet

## SERMON OUTLINE

December 4<sup>th</sup> 2005

Second Sunday in Advent, Year B:  
Isaiah 40: 1-11; 2 Peter 3 8-15a; Mark 1: 1-8

There's a joke (which the writer of this outline has used so often that it may well be past its sell-by date) which goes...

A man's aged aunt died and left him a violin and an oil painting. "I have good news and bad news for you" said the solicitor, handing over the Will. The good news is that you have here a Stradivarius and a Rembrandt. The bad news is that the violin is by Rembrandt and the painting by Stradivarius.

The word "Gospel" means "good news".  
But is it good news for everyone?  
Is it good news for you?

The passage from Isaiah is usually dated from the time of the Exile. The People of Israel have lost their homeland, their temple has been destroyed, and they have been carted off to what is now Iraq. They no longer have a home, an identity, nor - they might well think - a God. But then, in this physical and spiritual wilderness, they hear the voice of the prophet: "Comfort my people, says your God". You are not lost, you are not forgotten: I am coming to you, and like a shepherd gathers the lambs in his arms, I will lift you up and bring you home.

In the same way, five hundred years later, a man appeared in the wilderness back in Judea. This time the bad news all around was the Roman occupation, the corruption of civil society, and the hypocrisy and divisiveness of religious life. And this prophet - John the Baptist - also brought good news from God: the promise of a way out, but also the clear indication that they might be getting more than they wanted. Hence the call to get ready, and to repent.

Mission is about sharing the good news of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All around the world today the People of God are seeking to share the news that God is not absent, or even distant, but he's coming and he's here.

In some places, where the Church is a restricted minority or even persecuted, their calling is to live out the good news quietly and faithfully, trusting that God will use their witness in his own way. Mission agencies know that the best stories from the world church are the stories which cannot be told, because of the danger the people are in, but often these are the places where the support of the agencies is most needed and best given.

There are other parts of the world church where people are responding in great numbers to the good news of Jesus Christ and the church is experiencing rapid growth. St Andrews tide is a good time to remember that we are part of a world-wide family, and to give thanks for the global mission in which we all have a part to play. Mission agencies are no longer about what we in the West or the North can do to help poorer

people or weaker churches. They are about being together as a world church, sharing resources and learning from each other.

And what about the Church in Britain? Here, as in much of the rest of Europe, we are finding mission difficult. The good news of God's compassion and care still finds a response in pastoral care and at times of crisis, but often the Gospel as a whole does not connect with our kind of society. At best it often feels just irrelevant. So we have to ask ourselves some questions. Not, how can we be more like Africa - because like the Africans we must be the Church where God has planted us not where we might like to be. And not just, how can we save the Church - because the Kingdom of God is much larger than our religious institutions. But rather, what is the good news which people around us are looking for?

If they are looking for somewhere to belong, does our local church offer that?  
If they are looking for something that puts the rest of their life into perspective, can our Eucharist give them that experience?  
If they look around the world and despair of its future, how are we witnessing to a God who creates, changes and completes all things?  
If they fear their own inadequacy, and the final futility of death, does not our Gospel offer the assurance that they matter - and whatever they do they will always matter - to God?

In such ways all of us throughout the world church need to be hearing and sharing what is God's good news in each and every place. Sometimes we will hear different things, because we are not listening carefully enough, or because how the good news is heard and shared will be different in different places. We all know that the Anglican Communion is under great stresses and strains at the moment. If part of the good news is about our common calling, witnessing to the God who reconciles and recreates, is it not important to listen to him through listening to each other?

Just two more things. Firstly, however much we can take personal comfort in God's good news, and however much we seek to make it more 'relevant' to the people around us, the Gospel will always have a sharper edge. The people who flocked to hear John the Baptist soon realised that his call to repent and change their lives had the distinct chill of bad news about it as well! Churches which are growing as much as churches which feel they are standing still have to keep asking: are we too close to just meeting people's needs that we are not hearing what else God is calling us to?

And finally, the Epistle reading assures us that even when we think we are failing, when God does not seem to be doing what we want, we can trust in his purposes and in his time. In the end Growth and Success are our measurements, not his. "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness". Or, if you can cope with one last story: A man dies and goes to heaven. "Is it true," he asks God "that to you a thousand years is like a minute and a minute like a thousand years?" "Yes indeed" says God. "And is it true" the man asks "that to you a penny is like a million pounds and a million pounds like a penny?" "Of course" God replies. "Could you get me one of those pennies?" "Certainly" says God: "I'll only be minute".

*Bishop Michael Doe is General Secretary of U.S.P.G.*