

**Exeter Cathedral    4th December 2011    Advent 2 Year B**

Isaiah Ch 40 vv1-11

Mark Ch 1 vv1-8

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

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."'"

So begins St Mark's Gospel, usually regarded as the simplest of the four Gospels, the easiest to read and the recommended text for those who are new to The Bible. Here there are no accounts of the Christmas Nativity, no Shepherds in the fields, no Wise Men, no Mary and Joseph and no Archangel Gabriel; nor is there that statement of utter profundity with which John instead begins his gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word' and the further claim that this Word is the light of the World and that the darkness has not overcome it.

And yet, whilst this is all true, it also does an injustice to the Gospel as recorded by Mark, which possesses a beauty and symmetry all of its own. It also fails to take account of what I believe is an undervalued fact about the way in which Mark's Gospel begins.

The Bible itself, in Chapter One of Genesis begins with God's voice initiating creation as the Spirit brings forth order from the chaos. Chapter One of John's Gospel is understood as an echo of this earlier writing as the Word speaks and thereby brings forth order from the chaos of darkness. Put that way and in this context, the connection now becomes obvious. Mark quotes Isaiah and again a voice speaks and again it speaks of the bringing forth of order from chaos as the wilderness is tamed and the paths are made straight. In all three cases, order is created from chaos for that is the way in which God creates as He speaks and His creation responds.

In each case there is an improvement; there is progress and what is created is a better state of affairs than that which existed beforehand.

*(pause)*

Back in the early to mid nineties, my wife Kathryn and I had a cleaner named Lorna who had twin daughters called Vicky and Vanessa. Vicky and Vanessa were identical to the extent that I never could tell them apart, even at the age of fifteen, and they could also fool their mother and often did - usually to their own advantage. Now all three of them were besotted with what was then the very latest thing in Boy Bands, a group by the name of 'Take That' who went on to achieve enormous fame before splitting up in acrimony. If you've never heard of them, don't worry, you can still understand the story just as well.

More recently, 'Take That' got back together, much to the delight of their old fans and new ones alike, and they recorded an album which was released just over a year ago and which has already outsold all the offerings from their earlier career. It became the second fastest selling album of all time and had sold three million copies in Britain by last July. The only reason I noticed it is that I had a look for old-times sake and, to my fascination, discovered that it's full of religious language and imagery. Most of this need not concern us today, but there are two facts which will.

The first of these concerns the opening words of the first song on the album, which begins: 'Standing, on the edge of forever, at the start of whatever, shouting love at the world.' Now this is actually not a bad summary of what the writer of Genesis was trying to say and what John tells us in the opening of his Gospel. Just in case you are interested, the track is entitled 'The Flood' and I need say little more about it.

However, the second fact concerns the title of the Album, which is 'Progress'. Now I'm no expert on the lyrics of all the songs and I've not tried to analyse them in detail, but they seem to describe the ups and downs of humanity with the underlying message that as the years have gone by, so we might have made progress. The cover of the CD supports this idea, with its illustration

of human evolution and the implication that today we are better than we ever were in times past. The words of that first track make this explicit in their claim that 'there's progress now where there once was none', although in fairness some of the later tracks do acknowledge that all may not be well in the garden of humanity. Interestingly, however, a quick rummage through the 118 pages of the fans website devoted to discussions on the meaning of the album, leads simply to the conclusion that no-one with the time to waste on the site has the faintest idea what's going on. There is certainly no reference to any of the quite obvious religious language which pops up throughout the album.

*(pause)*

Now I don't really mind what the album is about and personally, I prefer Dire Straits and Mark Knopfler's solo albums anyway. But the point of telling you the story is because it takes us once more into this idea of progress.

If we read much of what we find around us, including the output of supporters of evolution, then it would be easy to come to the conclusion that the human race is making progress. We are better than we were in the past. Indeed, we are told that this must be the case because that is what evolution is about; it's all about getting better and making progress.

But such claims for evolution are simply not true. Evolution is about the way in which we are suited to our environment. It is not about progress and certainly not about moral progress. As human beings we may or may not turn out to be in a blind alley. In evolutionary terms, the fact that we care for the weak and those we describe as having genetic disorders may be a fundamental weakness or it may be an advantage - we simply cannot know. However, the point is that evolution is silent on the issue of moral progress, indeed, by its very nature, the pure scientific theory has to be. The secular followers who don't really understand the science and who have turned evolution into a pseudo-religion, fail to realise that they actually undermine their own cause.

From our perspective, evolution describes the way that living organisms develop over long periods of time. It is religiously neutral just as it is neutral to moral progress. However, it is very easy for us to become sucked into this notion of human progress and fail to realise just what we are doing when we make this error.

If it is possible for the human race to make a net overall moral progress and if it can continue this indefinitely, then there is no need for salvation. We would not need, as a race, to be saved from our state of Sin. If this were the case then not only would Jesus not need to have died on the cross but he would never have needed to have been born in the first place. If progress is ultimately possible then there would be no need for the Annunciation and no need for Incarnation. There would have been no need for Christmas. Actually, I have to admit, that if God loves us as much as I want to claim that He does, then He just might have wanted to have a go at being human anyway, but that's not the point. There would have been no need to make the paths straight or to create light in the darkness. Unlike the claims of the lyrics in 'The Flood' we are not capable of overcoming evil on our own.

Now I know that this sounds a bit pessimistic and we all like to think that we are improving and it's good that we try. But, at the end of the day, we all make mistakes, no-one can be perfect and we all need God's loving care and salvation - which takes us back to St Mark and the opening verses to his gospel as he gives us his version of love being shouted at the world.

*(pause)*

This season of preparation, this season of Advent calls us to look at ourselves not in the sense of the self-denial of Lent, but rather in terms of who we really are, where we have come from and where we are going to - can I claim to have made any progress in my life? Indeed, if we wanted to strip it down to basics, the fundamental question might be that of what we would still possess if the whole of our world was destroyed right now and we stood naked before God. What remains of us if we strip away our moral busyness and worldly possessions? This is the question for Advent and if it's not

uncomfortable then we have somehow missed the point. In this context I have to admit that whatever progress I may or may not have made, simply isn't going to be enough.

Now this is not to claim that good is absent from the world - indeed, as we are made in God's image, then by definition we cannot be totally bad. The point is that human progress will never result in perfection and anyone who tells us otherwise is deluded. It's sometimes said that Christianity posits a false dualism in which we are the goodies of the Heavenly City and the world is the baddies - and, sometimes, Christianity unfortunately does just that.

But this is a false picture, for any dualism, if we can call it that, is actually between two quite different things. On the one hand there is humanity, organised in its various political systems and under judgement for its pride and self-sufficiency, yet also containing attempts at goodness and in many places very real achievement to this end. On the other hand there is that sphere of human existence in which the power of divine grace and goodness is at work, whether this lies within the Church, beyond its visible boundaries or in the world to come. The Church inhabits both worlds and as Christians we live on the uncomfortable boundaries between them.

*(pause)*

'In the wilderness, prepare the way of The Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' Is this progress? Perhaps; we strive for progress and yet if we are honest we know that we can never get there, its as if a path through the forest was never ending so that no matter how far we walked and no matter how much the terrain appeared to improve, we never seemed to reach our destination. Then, in the midst of our despair, suddenly, the light breaks through and creates dappled patches in the darkness of our fear.

And what is the good news in all of this? Well, we are made in God's image and this means that we have the capacity both to love and to be loved. We sometimes talk so simply and easily about God's love for us that we forget that he also had to grant us the capacity to be loved too.

And, there is more, for Christmas is coming - that's why the way needs to be prepared in the wilderness in the first place. Christmas is coming when God gives to us Himself - nothing more and certainly nothing less. Here, suddenly, any human progress becomes insignificant as we encounter God in Him who, at the time of His birth, can actually do nothing and yet we also know that here, once again, God brings light out of darkness as He shouts His love at the world.