

10 December 2017

God of the Displaced

Isaiah 40.1-11

Mark 1.1-8

[This sermon was preached in the context of our Advent Toy Service in which toys were donated for the Barnet Refugee Service to be given as Christmas presents.]

Did you know that, according to the UNHCR – The United Nations Refugee Agency – there are 28,300 people forced to flee their homes because of conflict or persecution **every day**?

It is estimated that there are 65.6 million people worldwide who have been forcibly displaced.

The total number of people who are refugees amounts to 22.5 million.

And yet, only 189,300 refugees were re-settled in 2016.

Being displaced is the story of too many people in our world.

But, of course, it is not new.

Back in the 6th century BC most of the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem would have been among the statistics of the displaced. The people of Israel had been uprooted from their homes, their homeland destroyed, and forcibly marched to exile in Babylon ... where they had to learn to live the uncertain life of the dispossessed.

No UNHCR to take any interest in them, not even to count them. No Babylon Refugee Service to provide support and advocacy.

And it was to this group of displaced and dispossessed people that the prophet Isaiah of Babylon addressed his message.

He speaks words of comfort and encouragement to them. He needs them to understand that their God is the God of the displaced, who has not stayed behind in Jerusalem waiting for them, but who has travelled with them.

There is a promise that this God will lead them home ... through the wilderness that separates them from their homeland ... but the hope of rescue is based on the assurance that God is still with his people. He hasn't abandoned them. He is the God of the displaced, who is with them in the place of longing – with them in their uncertainty – with them in their vulnerability.

The God of the displaced.

Some 600 years later the words of the prophet Isaiah are quoted by Mark as he introduces us to the counter-cultural figure of John the Baptist –

John has displaced himself into the wilderness in response to the call of God, and lives the life of a wilderness dweller. He eats locusts – but not as a stunt in 'I'm a celebrity get me out of here!' – but as a way of life. He lives the life of the displaced –

Because, with the prophet Isaiah, he is seeking to be true to the God of the displaced.

He has a rather different message for his time –

Where Isaiah had to persuade his people that though they were displaced from home, God was still with them, John came with a message to his people that, despite living in their homeland, they were all of them displaced from God.

He lived his life in the wilderness as a prophetic symbol of that displacement ... but he also called on the people to themselves enact a prophetic symbol to acknowledge their need to 'return home to God' – he called them to baptism as a sign of repentance.

Sally and I went Christmas shopping on Friday – joy of joys!!

I did my very best to put myself into it ... but knew I was failing when Sally said to me, 'Are you still with me? I might as well be doing this on my own!'

It seems as if I was 'with Sally, but not with Sally'.

John's message to the people was that it might have looked as if they were 'at home', but actually they were 'displaced' ... and needed to return home.

And the God of the displaced was ready to welcome them home.

And then into this scene comes Jesus.

Now when Mark introduces his account of the life of Jesus he chooses his words very carefully.

"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

It is the word 'gospel' that is packed with meaning for Mark and his listeners – especially as it introduces the account of a significant life.

We probably rush over this word.

Either because the word 'gospel' has taken on for us a description of any of the documents that tell us about the life of Jesus – so we have the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

But Mark's was probably the first and the word didn't have that meaning then.

Or we have been taught that gospel can be translated simply 'good news' – so Mark is telling us that this story that he is going to tell is something positive and upbeat and worth listening to.

But this word has got a background in Roman culture that means that it is packed with meaning and intent.

This is an inscription about the Emperor Octavian from about 7BC: "Because providence has ordered our life in a divine way ... and since the Emperor through his epiphany has exceeded the hopes of former good news (euaggelia), surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future will surpass him, and since the birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of his good news, may it therefore be decreed that ..."

And when the Romans celebrated the birthday of an Emperor, the day was called an 'evangel' – a good news day. It was, after all, the 'birthday of the god.'

So when Mark chooses this word to speak about the life of Jesus, he is choosing his words very carefully.

He is daring to suggest that the coming of Jesus is more significant than the dawn of a new emperor – here, in the coming of God among his people in Jesus, is where we find *real* good news.

But Mark wants us to see that this good news is beyond all expectations – because the good news of the coming of this Son of God begins in the wilderness ... with Jesus coming to John.

Because the good news that Jesus brings is the gospel of the displaced and dispossessed, for the displaced and dispossessed.

He begins his life in the wilderness with John – the place of the dispossessed.

His life will come to its climax as he is forcibly displaced from this world in the crucifixion – crying, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

The God of the displaced and the God-forsaken.

Here is good news for the 65.5 million displaced in our world – he is the God of the displaced and God-forsaken

Here is good news for all who know themselves to be displaced from God in our world – he is the God who welcomes us home in forgiveness – the God of the displaced.