

## Sunday 6 December (Advent 2), a Reflection

Toad in the hole, sticky toffee pudding, tear and share garlic bread, cauliflower cheese, steak and ale pie, mac n' cheese, Beef Wellington, egg and chips, fish pie, lasagne with basil and four cheese sauce, chocolate. What have all these in common? It's obvious, isn't it – they're comfort foods. Comfort foods make us feel better, many of them achieve this not just by filling us with stodge but by reminding us of good times past, of family, friends and security.

That's also one of the reasons why we talk about Christmas as a time of comfort and joy, as the Church of England is indeed doing just this year in a special, national initiative. Comfort and joy conjures up images of well-fed families, paper crowns slipping over their noses, dozing in front of the telly, beside a roaring log fire. This kind of comfort is about nostalgia, about things as they used to be, about escape.

This not, perhaps, exactly what Isaiah has in mind when he begins a new and wonderful section of his prophesy, with the most wonderful verse: 'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.' The context of Isaiah's words is that the people of Israel have been exiled in Babylon for too many long years. Life has been tough and hope has been in short supply, because the ground of that hope, a sense of God's presence and care has all but evaporated. These words burst into the gloom like a bright ray of sunshine.

The message they bring is that God has not forgotten his people or their problems. Whatever they have done in the past, their relationship with God remains constant because God is always prepared to reach out to them in love. Their exile will end. They aren't being punished. They will return to Jerusalem. A new and more hopeful future is not far off. God can be trusted.

This is a different kind of comfort. It points to the future rather than to the past. It's not just about a God who gets alongside those who hurt in order to share their sadness, it's about a God who's going to do, as Isaiah will soon say, something new.

Every Advent we remember this promise and wonder about what it still may mean for us. The context we live in could hardly be more different, yet our situation has its own challenges and our need of comfort is as strong as ever, as long as we don't confuse our desire for lasting comfort with the ephemeral and irresistible relief offered by a steaming hot dish of home-cooked food or a

snooze by the fire. Real comfort rests in knowing that we are not forgotten and that instead of escaping for a while into the past we can find the fresh strength and courage to reach out to what might be new. Thankfully, you may be glad to know, this too is where the Church of England's vision of Comfort and Joy differs from the mid-winter festive bash that we'll have forgotten by the middle of January - except when we look with horror at our bank statements.

We need the second kind of comfort, Isaiah's vision of comfort, more than ever perhaps, as we begin to pick ourselves up from the tragedy of the last year and begin to wonder what kind of church and society we may be about to enter. And yet, in this context, God's promise revealed by Isaiah, 'I am about to do a new thing,' can make us apprehensive rather than reassured and excited. The new, I know, can seem very threatening if it might mean that so many of the things that we have valued or taken for granted are under threat.

These kinds of concerns are particularly deeply felt by many loyal church-folk who look at the bright-eyed plans articulated in almost breathless language by the church's leaders, movers and shakers as distinctly cold comfort, especially if it may mean that they will no longer have their 'own' vicar or even their much-loved church building as a fixed point to turn to when life's crises overwhelm them.

But the 'new thing' that Isaiah prophesies is wholly consistent with the God we have known in the past and whose message of love and care remains unaltered. If it isn't, it's just hot air. Isaiah reminds us that 'the grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever.' In short, we may not all live to see God's future and the new thing that God always brings into being, but that future is assured. God's love is for always and as we travel towards it, although there will be change and challenge for us to face, the essential promise of God's presence remains constant.

As we journey on along the way, we may also have a lot of fun. The food writer, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall insists that true comfort food need not be heavy and stodgy, but is anything that gives us delight and refreshes our tastebuds. That analogy rings loud bells with me. His point is that new flavours can be very good and a source of delight that we'd be sorry to miss. And so is God's future. 'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. I am about to do a new thing. Don't be afraid. I am with you.'