

**SERMON AT YORK: GEOFF CHADWICK: ADVENT 2: Isa 40:1-11:
"BUILDING HIGHWAYS TO GOD"**

Today's Old Testament reading is very familiar to us even if it is only because it forms part of Handel's Messiah. I take as my text the verses:

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plane" (Isa 40: 3-4, NRSV.)

These verses come from a time in history where armies used to build highways before themselves so that the army could travel easily and quickly behind. Sometimes such roads were built for the King so that he could travel easily. It's a bit like having the main roads department rebuilding the roads ahead of anyone who might be important. (Well maybe...)

Isaiah writes at a time when the nation had been in exile. The Hebrew people had been carried away as refugees into a foreign land. Now, however, they had been given a chance to go home. At last they could see, metaphorically at least, a highway being built for them. A highway that would lead them from their exile, through the desert back, home. The people are comforted because they sense the opportunity to go home. As it was, King Cyrus of Persia did take them back home and it is even conceivable that his army had built a highway that led them. Perhaps the refugees saw the highway being built before them, perhaps they lent a hand pulling up tree stumps, moving boulders and shovelling earth. Perhaps they too, levelled valleys and raised mountains. Can you imagine a group of excited road workers?

But you see, there is more to this than simply building a road home. For the Hebrew people a road home also meant a road back to God. For them, God was located at Mt Zion in Jerusalem. Not that he had abandoned them completely, but to know God's presence fully, the Hebrews needed a place. That place, for them, was the temple. That place for us is the church. Sure, we all know that God can be worshipped everywhere and that God is

omnipresent, but there seems to be something in the hearts of human beings to desire a place - a physical space- which acts as a stimulus to the presence of God. I trust that the church here does that for you. I trust that when you travel your highway to the door of this building that you have a sense of coming to your God. May every valley or hill which might preclude your sense of God here be made level.

It is the same with the church, not as building, but as people. As the people of God we are the highways to God for others. What others find in us they also apply to God. So how good a highway are we? Are we straight and level, well sign-posted, and easy to negotiate? Or are we a narrow, windy road with treacherous valleys and steep mountains to negotiate? What sort of a road to God are we?

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This is our task. There are so many people who are caught up in their own wildernesses. Adolescent hood, mid-life crisis, loneliness, despair and all sorts of other deserts. What opportunity do they have to find a straight path to God through them all? What opportunities do offer to provide a straight and level path for these people?

I leave you to you own thoughts to answer these questions.

Now there is a strange twist to all of this. You see, we might be trying to build a straight and level pathway to God, but we fail to notice that God has created his own path to us. So often we go seeking for God only to find out that he has sought us out before hand. This is the Advent message. The paths we have built to find God have all been made redundant in the birth of Jesus Christ. God took a path to come to us. It was a very ordinary sought of path - the path of birth, of life on earth and the path to crucifixion. A path where he sought out the ones who were in the wilderness. This is the significance of the Gospel

reading. Jesus seeks out John the Baptist not because he needed the baptism of repentance but because he had to seek out those who were in the wilderness.

Straightened paths, levelled mountains and raised up valleys - God does this because he seeks those who are in the wilderness. Our task as a church is to co-operate with the "road building" of God. No matter what we are as the people of God, we must be broad avenues to God. Wherever we have become narrow; let us broaden the way. Wherever we have become twisted and confused; let us unwind. Wherever we have put mountains before others; let us level them out. And wherever we have allowed others to fall into the valleys we have created; let us raise them up!

"Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together..."

(Isa 40:5, NRSV.)