

December 10, 2017 Going Home Homily: Brothers and sisters, in the festive liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas, it is not uncommon for many of us to hear one of the masterworks of the great eighteenth century, the composer George Frederic Handel's *The Messiah*. It is surely worth noting that the libretto of the Oratorio features words from the prophet Isaiah's so-called Book of Consolation, which begins chapter forty. It is indisputably one of the best known prophecies of the Old Testament and is quoted quite liberally by preachers in the Advent season. The words are as follows: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people saith the Lord. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem; and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned". (Is.40:1-2)

The biblical background of Isaiah's prophecy is the Babylonian captivity, which dates back six centuries before the birth of Christ. For seventy years the Jews were a captive people and lived in exile far from their ancestral homeland. The prophet is called by God to bring a message of hope and consolation to the Chosen People, who had suffered through years of persecution. Through God's designated instrument, the Pagan ruler Cyrus, He, the Shepherd of Israel will lead his flock back to Palestine, the biblical site of their sacred temple in Jerusalem. "Do not fear: I am with you; do not be anxious: I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you. I will uphold you by my victorious right hand". (Is.40:10)

Does an event in the far distant past continue to speak to us today?

Recently, a young man, the brother of the bride, approached me during a wedding reception and asked me a question. "Do you agree with President Trump's decision to name Jerusalem as the capital of the modern state of Israel?" he inquired. I informed him that I could not answer his question since I had very little knowledge of the long simmering controversy. But I did share with him one of the more remarkable episodes of recent world history. In the aftermath of the Second World War, many of the Jews who were fortunate enough to have their lives spared during the war chose not to return to their homes in the countries of Western Europe. Instead, they chose to go to Palestine and re-settle there. Two years later the State of Israel would be recognized by the United States. Significantly, the Jews once again turned up in the holy city of Jerusalem. Deeply religious Jews recognized the Hand of God in their liberation from the camps and their opportunity to go to the Holy Land.

Let us ask ourselves if we, in faith, can sense the Hand of God active in our own lives and in the life of Christ's Church. How often do we doubt God's providence and think that he is absent?

Handel also quotes from the biblical text that we hear so often in Advent: "The voice that crieth in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God:" John the Baptist picks up this message. He prepares the people for the coming of the Messiah". (Mk.1:3) "The Way" is one of the richest expressions of the entire bible. The phrase reminds us of Christ, who is "The Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn. 14:6) in our earthly pilgrimage. We are on a journey to the Kingdom of Heaven. Before the disciples of Jesus were called Christians, they were known as followers of "The Way".

Good Shepherd, feed us and lead us to the Promised Land!

Amen!