**Isaiah 35:1-10**

**Hope for the future**

In our first reading, from Isaiah 35, the first verse has this wonderful promise: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

As a nation, we have been through a torrid few years. We have faced political uncertainty because of Brexit and our families have often become divided and friendships have come under strain as the political issue has seeped deeper and deeper into the public consciousness.

We have seen terror attacks in Manchester, in London, in Salisbury.

We have come through two General Elections in two years.

We are beginning to sense the enormous social and environmental turmoil that will hallmark the coming few decades as a result of the climate crisis and the protests surrounding that.

It has been a torrid few years and, for many, a sense of hope and optimism has dissipated.

And now we have a new Government and regardless of our own political preferences, we pray for those who now assume the mantle of power and we pray that, somehow, the nation will begin to come back together and we can build a better future than we have experienced in the last few years.

Our hope is that these words from Isaiah 35 will speak to us today: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

As a church, we have come a long way over the last few years. It has been a bumpy ride for many and a lot of issues have been addressed: a tremendous amount of work around the fabric of our buildings, the development of our youth and children’s work, new liturgies, new ways of worshipping, tackling the deep financial problems that this church has faced. We are now into our second Mission Action Plan in five years and our Mission Action Plan, ‘Towards 2030’ is a radical program of change and development. And the next 12 months are likely to see considerable shifts in how we do things, not least the new service structures coming in early next year.

And we don’t make these changes just for the sake of changing things. There is a purpose behind it all – because we are pursuing these words of hope expressed in Isaiah 35: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

We believe that God has a special purpose for this church and that we are to be a blessing to this community in how we share and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this town.

So whether it is on a national level or on a local level or with regard to this church, we hold onto this promise in Isaiah: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

But deserts do not just bloom on their own.

First, there needs to be a vision for what the desert can be, and then plans needs to be drawn up and the finances secured. And then the hard work begins as irrigation is put into place and teams work together to put in place the infrastructure that will be required, to change the landscape for the better.

Then, when all that infrastructure is put in place, finally, the seeds are planted and watered and nurtured and time goes by when it seems as if nothing is happening.

But deep in the soil, new life is emerging and eventually, in God’s good time, the plants begin to shoot and, after many years of effort and patient waiting, the desert begins to rejoice and bloom.

The vision gives way to the miracle.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

This passage in Isaiah was written about 700BC during a really difficult time for the people of Israel. There was tremendous political unrest in the nation. The religious institutions needed reform and change so that they could become useful to the people again in leading them to God.

A situation not dissimilar to our own times.

Life had become like a desert for the people of Israel: their politics, their religious institutions were burned out, dead, dry and lifeless, and the people of Israel were feeling beaten down and broken. And so they were waiting for their Messiah to come; this Messiah who would liberate them and free them and give them a future worth hoping for.

And these words of Isaiah were designed to give them hope in this dark hour: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

On a personal level, we all go through times that feel like a desert experience and perhaps you are going through one of those times in your life now. These desert experiences can be the result of any number of negative experiences: bereavement, illness, a divorce, job loss, financial insecurity and so many other things.

And when we experience times like that in our lives, we need to know that there is hope for tomorrow. We want the desert of our life to bloom.

And so the message of Advent, this period before Christmas, is a time when we join with the people of Israel in a time of waiting – waiting for the Messiah.

And God’s promise to us is that when the Messiah comes, when Jesus establishes his kingdom in your life and mine, there is a transformation in which the darkness is dissipated and hope flourishes.

When the Messiah comes, “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

When Jesus came to earth 2,000 years ago, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, he found thousands of people for whom life had become like a desert. The woman at the well, with all her personal turmoil. The centurion, whose son had severe epilepsy. Matthew the tax collector, who suffered abuse and was so lonely. The leper, who was a social outcast. All these people, and thousands more, whose lives were like a desert and they desperately needed hope for the future. They needed Isaiah’s prophecy to come true for them in a deeply personal way: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

And whenever Jesus came into their lives, they experienced a deep healing and a personal transformation and the desert of their lives did indeed begin to bloom again.

And that, of course, is the promise of God to each one of us. That if we invite Jesus into our lives and give ourselves over to him, we will experience his healing, and discover hope for the future and the desert regions of our life will give way to such a flourishing that we could never have dreamt possible. There is no limit to what Jesus can do for you and me if we let him…

But, of course, as with the blooming of any desert, it takes hard work. Just as people need to do the preparatory work for the desert to bloom by coming up with the vision and the digging of foundations and the commitment to planning ongoing irrigation systems and so on, so we need to do the preparatory work in our own hearts to receive Jesus.

And that is what Advent is all about, of course.

We can just arrive at Christmas Day without really having given much thought to Jesus and we can participate in the celebrations and have a great time but somehow, we might have been so busy enjoying Christmas that, in reality, we will have missed Christmas…

Or we can use these final weeks of Advent in doing the preparatory work in our hearts; reflecting on our need for God, reflecting on his love for us, reflecting on what Jesus has done for us by dying on the cross and then crying out to God for him to send his Son into our lives. And then, when Christmas comes, we can embrace Christmas for what it is: the story of God embracing us.

But it takes patience for a desert to bloom; it doesn’t happen overnight. It takes commitment.

A friend of mine was at a Cambridge college recently and you know just how beautiful the lawns are in the Quads of those colleges. And the gardener was out there that day doing his work. And my friend said to him, “How do you get the grass on this lawn looking so beautiful?” The gardener said, “It’s really easy. All you have to do is this: one week, you mow the grass left to right. The next week, you mow it up and down. Just repeat that process carefully for 100 years, and your grass will end up looking like this!”

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”

But be patient, and use Advent to wait on God, to wait on the Messiah.

When you invite him into your life, you will be transformed: not overnight, but over a period of time, over a lifetime.

God’s promise to us this Advent is that he wants us to prepare our hearts to receive his Messiah and we need to prepare our hearts for that. And what we will receive in our lives from God will be worth the wait:

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom.”