

Do you ever recall a time of feeling very empty within yourself. It might have been for a number of reasons – it might be an agonising worry about ourselves or a loved one. There is that feeling of helplessness, a feeling of being very alone. A feeling that the world about us, maybe even God himself, is totally indifferent to our plight. I would suspect that that is an experience that most of us can recall at some stage or another to a greater or lesser extent.

This morning we have read from the Book of the prophet Isaiah. These later chapters of this book are set in a time towards the end of the period of exile in Babylon. As I have often remarked, this was a traumatic time for the exiles – Jerusalem had been occupied and ransacked, the Temple had been destroyed. They found themselves captive in the land of their enemies, cut off from all that was familiar – their homes, their worship in the Temple, all that gave life its shape – and God seemed strangely silent.

Then in the second half of our Old Testament Lesson, God seems to break his silence. We hear words of promise – promise of salvation, promise of God's abiding commitment. When the prophet spoke of the salvation of Jerusalem, he was not just speaking of a secular city but of a place that served as a focus of God's dealing with his people. What was being addressed was not just the dream a people had for freedom – it was speaking to this emptiness, this sense of separation from God that had darkened the very souls of the captives.

What is expressed in Isaiah is hope. What we see in the story is fulfilment of hope. In the Carol Service we read that lovely passage in Luke that speaks of the angels announcing the good news of the birth of Jesus.

In that passage, the shepherds witnessed God breaking his silence his silence – the announcement by the angels of God breaking into the world in the birth of the Christ child, the birth of one destined from the very dawn of time to break down the alienation of sin and death that separated man and God, to fill that emptiness in the soul of man.

The shepherds heard the news, they went to see the child and then spread the good news – they were if you like part and parcel of this process of God breaking his silence. It is this area of agents of God as he breaks his silence that I want to think of our response to the Christmas story.

Before his death and return to the father, we read of Jesus giving his disciples the task of continuing his mission, of preaching the Gospel, of breaking God's silence in the hearts and minds of men and women.

In his own writings, Paul reminds us that God sent the Spirit of his son into our hearts, a Spirit that would guide, strengthen, confirm them in their discipleship of reaching out in his name to a darkened and hurting world.

The shepherds on the hillside that first Christmas Eve heard the Good News of the birth of the Child – they went, they saw and then they shared the Good News. I spoke at the outset of that experience of emptiness, of God's distance and seeming silence in our lives. God speaks to our emptiness and, more often than not, part of that is through the words and actions of another. God calls out to reach out in love to those who are hurting, to those for whom this words is dark. This is after all very much the motivation of the Church's Ministry of

Healing, that we allow ourselves to be used as instruments of God through whom he breaks his silence to this often dark and threatening world.