

Do you remember some occasion when you were in deep trouble as a child at home? That awful feeling as you experienced your parent's anger, or maybe worse disappointment. Experienced some penalty – grounded for a few days, loss of pocket money perhaps.

Most of us have experienced that in one way or another – administered it as parents perhaps. Whichever side we are coming from, we have known something of the alienation from someone we in fact cared deeply about, the breakdown of relationships.

But we have also known those relationships being put back together again. Sometimes all that is needed is a simple sorry. In other cases more has to be done to re-establish trust, re-open communications. Sometimes it can happen quickly, sometimes it takes much longer.

The Bible talks of broken relationships, of mending relationships. The great prophets speak of the relationship between God and his people Israel. They speak of the relationship not in isolation but in the context of the daily life of the people, in the context of their conduct in the life of the community, in the context of their political life, and of course their spiritual life.

In this season of Advent the Old Testament lessons for our first three Sundays were drawn from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, one of the great prophets of Israel, who ministered as the southern Kingdom of Judah crumbled in the face of first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, before experiencing the humiliation of the Exile.

The work of the Prophets such as Isaiah was not first and foremost one of foretelling the future – that is a misconception that has crept into our understanding of the work of these men – these books of the Bible are not some sort of holy 'Old Moore's Almanac' that some would seem to treat them

as. The work of the prophet was to speak God's word to God's people at a particular point in their history – the prophet saw himself as called upon to proclaim in very personal terms God's warning, God's judgement, God's deliverance.

These have been recognised as God's word to his people across boundaries of culture and time. They say something very important to us about the nature of the God we worship Sunday by Sunday, whom we seek to serve in our daily lives.

As I read the prophets I have a picture of God engaging with his people. God is a God who relates to his people not as some remote, disinterested figure, not simply as a supreme being but rather as a father relates to a child. It is not for nothing that Jesus taught us to address him as Abba, a word a Jewish child would use in speaking to her father. Indeed the Jewish people, drawing on many themes of the Old Testament, offer great insights into this very personal relationship between God and his people. I think of the character Topol, in the film 'Fiddler on the Roof' debating with God as he walks along – from the flippant 'Would it spoil some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man?' to the more serious problems facing his family and his community in 19th century Russia. I think of the Psalms, those hymns of the ancient Temple, that range from extravagant joy before God, to the despairing, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' right through to the bleak 'blessed be he that takes your children and throws them against the rocks.'

I get a picture here of God as one to whom I can bring the whole of life, my joy, my pain, even my anger; a God who listens, who cares – a God also who is Lord and focus of my worship and obedience. As we draw to the end of this season of Advent we are conscious of the approaching festival of Christmas, the festival of the Incarnation, of God coming among us in the person of his son, Jesus Christ.

At the heart of this is the specifically Christian insight into the nature of the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob. It takes the whole concept of God engaging with his creation, with his people onto a new plane. As we find in Jesus one in whom and through whom God declares and makes possible his redeeming love; one in whom and through whom God speaks personally and directly; one in whom and through whom God gathers his people to himself.

It is in the person of Jesus – in his actions and his words – that I hear God speaking to me words of comfort and assurance, that my sins have been paid for, that my sins are forgiven – I encounter a Father restoring fellowship with a wayward child.

I come back to this concept of encounter. Jesus is not just another prophet, not just another teacher proclaiming God's word to God's people at a particular time and in a particular situation. Jesus is God's Word. As we will hear in the Christmas Gospel later in the week; 'In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God The Word became flesh and lived among us we have seen his glory.

As ones who have encountered the living God in the person of his son Jesus Christ, we are called to live in the light of that encounter, as signs to the world of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – that in our lives people may experience the power of forgiveness, of reconciliation in the world of today – not just a difference in my own private life before God but the difference it makes in my daily life, in relationships – and through us the difference it can make in society at large.

May God grant to each one of us a vision of his love for us and work through us to proclaim that live in word and deed to the world in which we live; that through us people may be drawn to their own encounter with the living God.