

Because we only have two readings for Morning Prayer, the preacher can choose between the Old Testament and the Epistle. So Father David emailed me earlier in the week to ask which I wanted. I read them both, and there, standing four-square in the middle of Isaiah 64 verse 9, was my father.

My father was a little man. He was so short that even in his 20s when he went on a bus with his 6ft cousin he usually got half-fare. He served in the Navy throughout the war and was universally known as Titch. He couldn't get a ready-made suit to fit, and my mother had to shorten his shirtsleeves by a good six inches before he could wear them. But inside that rather small frame there was a colossal character. At the slightest suggestion of poor service, unfairness or maladministration, off he would march to the shop or the office, brook no excuses until he got to see the man at the top (it was always a man in those days), pull himself up to his full 5'2", plonk his trilby hat down on the desk and say: 'Now – look here!' 'Now – look here!' would be followed by an accurate and succinct description both of the problem and what would be required to put it right, and the timeframe within which appropriate remedial action must be taken. It invariably worked.

The Book of Isaiah is a compendium of three separate prophets. The first is genuinely called Isaiah; he tells us so. The other two were speaking and writing in the same tradition, which ran from the eighth to the sixth century BC, starting a century before the Israelites were driven into exile and finishing as King Cyrus of Persia allowed them to start going back to Jerusalem. Today our reading is from 'third Isaiah', and I think that third Isaiah must have met my father. There stands the prophet, four-square in front of God, spelling out how tremendous God used to be, acknowledging that the Israelites have been a pretty miserable and feckless bunch, and suggesting that this is God's fault! 'You were angry and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed.' Yes, OK, we're a pretty rotten lot, but it's because you abandoned us. That's the problem. But look, Lord, you can still put this right. We are the clay and you are our potter. 'Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember our iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.' Now – look here! It's almost enough to make you feel sorry for God.

But God is listening. He knows his chosen people, the Israelites, have been punished harshly for what successive generations of them have done. He knows there have always been a loyal nucleus of people who have kept the faith despite everything that has happened. He will bring them back to Israel. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt they were in the wilderness for so long that no-one who was part of the original Exodus survived to enter the Promised Land. It was a clean start. Now, no-one who originally went into exile in Babylon is alive to go back to Israel. Another clean start. And in our gospel, after 'the suffering' – another time of terror, hardship and false messiahs – the Son of man will come again, to bring another clean start for the faithful people who remain.

What a promise for the beginning of a new year. It is, of course, a new year, Advent Sunday, when we put the last year behind us and start our preparation to welcome the mystery of the Incarnation at Christmas. What a year to put behind us. The pandemic isn't divine retribution in the way the prophets talked about it. But it has certainly forced us to take a very hard look at how we interact with each other, with the natural world and the global environment. For the first time in months there is hope of a vaccine and some more effective treatments. So there are choices to be made. Do we all pile in together for Christmas because that's what we always do? Or behave responsibly, and shorten the time until we can all meet more freely?

Do we stockpile vaccines for ourselves, or fund the WHO and poor countries to vaccinate their people – which will stop the global spread and risk of reinfection more quickly? Close our borders or offer our help? Turn up the heating or put another jumper on? Do we think that what we think will make no difference? Do we think we have no influence over these and many other decisions?

If so, that will certainly be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Surely, as Christians, as people who should help the least of God's people because they are doing it for him, we have a responsibility to try. It's saving a starfish – you know the story of the man who saw a boy walking along a beach on which thousands of starfish had been washed up in a storm. The boy was picking up starfish and throwing them back into the sea. 'What are you doing that for – you won't make any difference!', said the man. 'It will make a difference to this one!', said the boy, throwing another one back. It's being alert to every possibility of making a difference, and not worrying about what to say, because when that time comes God will give us the words. Surely we want to contribute to a less divided, fairer, less greedy, more compassionate society? Surely we want humanity to flourish without destroying our planet in the process?

We cannot just assume that everything will somehow get sorted out in the end. We can't risk waiting for other people to take the initiatives – they may be waiting for us. Let's learn the lessons from the year we've had and step forward into the new one determined to make a difference, even to one starfish. Remember the prophet, standing up to God, pointing out what's wrong and demanding that he listen. I'd suggest a new year resolution, except that notoriously they don't usually last more than a few days. Instead, make a firm promise before God. If you see something unjust, unfair or just plain wrong, find the right person to confront, stand up, clear your throat and say with confidence: 'Now - look here. Now, consider. We are all your people.'