

SERMON: 2017/12/10 (2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B) - Is. 40:1-11, Ps. 85:1-2,8-13, 2 Pet. 3:8-15a & Mk. 1:1-8_BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front. Have a pile of long grass and some sellotape nearby.]

We are the People of God: You and me and everybody sitting here in this room. And lots of other people sitting in different churches all across America and the world.

We are His friends: *Jesus'* friends.

But a long, long time ago, there weren't as many of us.

In fact, only a very tiny nation of 12 tribes called "the Jews" - also known as "the Hebrews" or "Israelites" - were The People of God.

And we've been hearing about their earliest stories, which nearly *all* took place in this area: [Gesture to the Levant on the map.]

Then, in a *shocking* twist(!), a couple of weeks ago, "the action" was transferred more than a *thousand* miles to the north-east. [Gesture to 'Babylon' on the map.]

Why?!

Because they'd been naughty.

And instead of finding their own business and concentrating on being a modest, quiet, righteous, *pure* people, they got caught up in a messy situation with their neighbours and were taken prisoner to 'Babylon.'

And now they were stuck there!

But God sent them a special messenger called "Isaiah."

And Isaiah told the people, who were complaining about their (new) captivity, that they'd brought this disaster on themselves.

In particular, by trusting in their human kings to guide them rather than the true king, God.

Now, what's wrong with that?

Because, says Isaiah, human beings are like "grass."

And to demonstrate the shortcomings of grass, I thought we could try and make a king out of it?

[Invite the children to try and make strawmen with the grass and sellotape. When finished, crush them all.]

Oh dear! They weren't very sturdy, were they?
They were weak, fragile, *temporary*.
And that's like people and their guidance or protection.

Let's pray: Father God, help us, by your Holy Spirit, to put our trust in you,
because you will never fail or fall, in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Ask the children to leave.]

I know what you're thinking.
You're thinking: our minister (Fr.) Ben is an awfully opinionated kinda guy, so it's weird that he's been so silent about this Weinstein-Spacey-Lauer-Moore phenomenon.
Maybe as a "Brit." he doesn't know these guys; doesn't realize how big this is?
Or maybe he doesn't care.
But that doesn't seem likely:
We're all talking about it.
It's on the car-radio and in the news, night-and-day; and it's nauseating.
Upsetting.
Surely, the Bible - *Jesus* - has something to say to "cut" through this relentless, disheartening "*noise*."
And you're right.
It does.
Nothing lies outside or beyond His concern.
And it emerges today in our readings.
Not that Isaiah foresaw exactly this particular scandal, embroiling Hollywood and "The Hill."
But he didn't need to, because, at its "heart," it is merely the latest instalment in the very oldest - human - story; which is that we make mistakes and then, having made them, we make excuses, refusing to fully acknowledge our fault, our "depravity."
Weinstein, for example, said this:

"I came of age in the '60s and '70s, when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different. That was the culture then."^[n.1]

This was from his statement published in *The New York Times*.
This was the opportunity he had to apologise, *which he squandered*; preferring to blame "*culture*:" that supposedly beastly, *irresistible* force that makes men lecherous and predatory, when deep down, they're just misunderstood kittens: playful and sweet.

It's "*culture*" that twists their desires.
It's "*culture*" that takes their hands - tools for giving comfort to the opposite sex [demonstrate giving a hug around the shoulders], for showing solidarity and equality with the opposite sex [demonstrate a handshake] - and makes

them “grope-y” and grab-y” - *and much worse*.

And if only the big, bad, scaly culture monster would leave me alone and stop leading me astray, then none of this would have happened.

And the Israelites - the “Hebrews” - had been saying much the same about their own (terrible) misfortunes, blaming the pagan kingdoms around them and Edom in particular [Isa. 34:8].

In fact, they’d almost actively courted this *enculturation* themselves: asking, after Joshua’s death, for ‘a king...*like other nations*’ [1 Sam. 8:5. My emphasis], which the prophet Samuel *warned* them would likely bring with it practices and thinking *alien* to God’s vision for them as a peculiar, distinctive people ‘set apart’ [for this phrase (in the NRSV) see Ps. 4:3, but see also Exo. 11:7].

Furthermore, their failure to “drive out” the Canaanites immediately, and the many decades of uneasy co-existence that followed (under the “Judges”) as a consequence, led to a “melting-pot” scenario in which, despite strident denunciations from the faithful - like Elijah, polytheistic errors crept into the community of the True Faith, and archaeologists have even found evidence of this: excavations in the Holy Land have uncovered hundreds of female figurines - *idols!* - from the period immediately preceding The Exile - figurines that were, seemingly, being used in an underground, back-room, back-alley *counter-religion* to the one passed down from Abraham.[n.2]

If, then, Israel’s values became confused and destructive, producing the sort of worldly behaviour that entangled them in the messy regional politics that led to their foreign imprisonment in Babylon, there were real, *external* sources for that confusion.

And, similarly, there are commentators who see the actions of Weinstein and his “ilk” - let’s call the phenomenon “Hefnerism” or “Polanski-ism” [n.3] - as the “downstream” “fruit” of the widespread and increasingly *de-stigmatized* consumption of pornography.[n.4]

Indeed, a report in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that there was a correlation - for their participants - between the regularity of seeing women naked and then viewing them as *animals*, to be made use of, to be, *primarily*, petted and caressed.[n.5]

In other words, the growing prevalence of sexual content on our screens, whether in triple-X “Adult” DVDs or ‘Game of Thrones’ - is, to use the American College of Pediatricians’ term, “distorting” us.[n.6]

So, should we let “pervy” media-moguls and sleazy politicians “off the hook”? And ourselves too, for our own dirty secrets?

No. Firstly, because Scripture reveals that we are all “enlightened” by the Holy

Spirit to make *free* choices [see: 2 Tim. 1:9; Rom. 2:12-14], of which we can - and will - be held accountable. All of us. Christians and everybody else too:

Whatever Weinstein claims, we *aren't* just *victims* of the time and place in which we were born and raised.

But "Heaven" recognises too that there are a lot of unhelpful, *hindering* influences all around; and so has provided a gauge - a plumb-line, as Amos sees it [Amo. 7:8] - against which we can measure conduct and opinion, and this, observes Isaiah, is "the word of our God[, which] will stand forever" (i.e. "The Bible").

[He was speaking, of course, of only the Pentateuch - the first five books.]

[Holding the Bible aloft.] If this isn't your "how to" moral guidebook, it should be.

It's supposed to be:

The prophet is saying that it the very reason for its existence.

And its provision, publication and distribution mean that, for most of us, there can be little excuse.

It *illuminates* what our God-provided consciences can only *hint* at.

Because that's the thing about instinct, isn't it?

Often we get a "gut feeling" about what's wrong and right, but struggle to give it expression - to understand "the tug" - that "prompting," which emerges from a place, deep-down; from *outside* my conscious, intellectual mind.

And this is the (eternal) Holy Spirit working in you.

But "yes," her voice can be stifled - suffocated, *distorted*.

As can any of our *natural* inclinations, which God calls "good."

Thus, we hear that Richard Dreyfuss thought he was merely - innocently - "flirting" when he unzipped his trousers to show pretty actresses his "private parts".[n.7]

The fact that he ever thought this shows just how confused we can become without clear boundaries.

And these we find in the Scriptures.

They eliminate the "grey" area.

In 1 Timothy 5, verse 2, the Apostle Paul says to men, treat women (that you're not married to) as *either* your mother *or* you sister. And that's it. Clear-cut.

Black n' white.

Is this "puritanical"?

I guess you might say it is, and, interestingly, that's *also* the word that I've seen used in articles *wary* of the new atmosphere emerging in L.A. and Washington as a result of this "tidal-wave" of (unhappy) exposés [n.8].

But such a rigorous regime *can* - *would* - protect women - and men; it offers

them a “framework” in which there is *much* freedom. And ‘holiness and honor’ too [1 Thess. 4:4].

But we struggle against and resist such a demanding standard. I’ve got all kinds of regrets and shame in my life (that it wouldn’t accommodate).

They’re like Jacob Marley’s chains from Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. What about those, then?

Well, notice that Isaiah didn’t stop where he did.

His last words aren’t just about the blessing we’ve received in the gift to us of “the word of our God,” the Bible.

He goes on, to speak about some (further, *even better*) “good tidings” that are worth *shouting(!)* from ‘high mountains’, and that’s of God not staying away in unapproachable light in the throne-room of Heaven, but who ‘comes [near]’ - as a shepherd-figure: as someone who is, in other words, tender and compassionate and *relatable*; and I wonder who he could mean?

For the prophet here seems to be *hinting* at an event in *his* future - our past, which will see some sort of “humanification” of the Creator.

He already dropped some “spoilers” about this mysterious character in the earliest, opening chapters of his vision [see 9:6]; but we need to wait for our readings on the 25th to hear more.

So, let’s be patient.

After all, isn’t that what Advent is about?

Footnote:

1. ‘Statement From Harvey Weinstein’ (5th of October 2017), *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/05/us/statement-from-harvey-weinstein.html?src=twr> (accessed December 6, 2017).
2. See: Scham, Sandra (March 2005), ‘The Lost Goddess of Israel’, *Archaeology*, Volume 58, No. 2, pp. 36-40, 40; Holladay, John S., Jr. (1987), ‘Religion in Israel and Judah Under the Monarchy: An Explicitly Archaeological Approach’, in Miller, P. D.; Hanson, P. D. & McBride, S. D. (Eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, Philadelphia, P. A.: Fortress Press, pp. 249-299, 275-278; or, Hadley, Judith M. (2000), *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel & Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 196-205.

3. For both these terms see: Douthat, Ross (14th of October 2017), 'The '70s and Us', *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/opinion/sunday/1970s-weinstein-sexual-predation.html> (accessed December 6, 2017).
4. For example: Blakeman, Katherine (25th of October 2017), 'How Our Pornified Culture Produces Harvey Weinsteins', available at <https://townhall.com/columnists/katherineblakeman/2017/10/25/how-our-pornified-culture-produces-harvey-weinsteins-n2400112> (accessed December 8, 2017).
5. See: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/experiments-in-philosophy/201111/does-pornography-treat-women-objects>
6. See: https://www.acpeds.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/6.28.16_The-Impact-of-Pornography-on-Children-updated-with-sex-trafficking.pdf
7. Zanotti, Emily (11th of November 2017), 'Richard Dreyfuss Accused Of Sexual Harassment By Hollywood Writer Jessica Teich', *The Daily Wire*, available at <http://www.dailywire.com/news/23452/richard-dreyfuss-accused-sexual-harassment-emily-zanotti> (accessed December 6, 2017).
8. Murray, Douglas (4th of November 2017), 'The Consequence of this New Sexual Counter-revolution? No Sex At All - Murray', *The Spectator*, available at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/11/the-consequence-of-this-new-sexual-counter-revolution-no-sex-at-all/> (accessed December 8, 2017).