Georg Frideric Handel chose those passages we just heard from Isaiah for the opening to his famous oratorio Messiah. The tenor sings recitatively, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.  And "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." These are the words we heard at the beginning of Mark’s gospel applied to the mission of John the Baptizer.

To prepare the way for the mightier one coming after him John knew that the way would be rough. Mountains of pride and hypocrisy would have to be made low, the dark valleys of ignorance, idolatry and unbelief would have to be filled with light. "John was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. But the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him."

The prophets tell us often enough about the unfaithfulness of God’s people, and warned them again and again. When Isaiah asked, “What shall I cry out?” Say, “All mankind is grass, and all their glory like the flower of the field.” It wilts “when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. ...Though the grass withers, the flower wilts, the word of our God stands forever”

From Malachi we find these apt words: “Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. ... But who will endure the day of his coming? and who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner’s fire or like the fuller’s lye.” John urged the people to acknowledge their sins, repent, and be baptized as a sign of their wanting to be cleansed of their former ways and start afresh. He does not hesitate to call a spade a spade. He said to some who came to him at the Jordan, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance.” He warned those listening, “every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

They anxiously question him, “What then should we do?” He told the crowds, “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.” He told the tax collectors, “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.” To the questioning soldiers, he said, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.”
Jesus repeats the same message even more clearly. We heard on Christ the King Sunday two weeks ago that final judgment scene from Matthew’s gospel. I am sure we would all like to be among the sheep on the right side of the Son of Man destined for sharing his eternal life. Well, are we clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, quenching the thirsty, giving shelter to the homeless, nursing the ill, or visiting those in prison? Look at the example of our oblate Bill Gaertner who helps those being released from prison to have a place to go to get a new start. Maybe some of our other oblates and friends do these charitable works. Not everyone can do them all, but we must be open to doing whatever we can to help those who do minister to the growing number of needy ones during this pandemic. Jesus makes it very clear whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we do to him.

If we still see our world darkly, it helps us when we trust in that prophecy of Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in a land of gloom (like ours) a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing.... For the yoke that burdened them, the pole on their shoulders, and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed.” Jesus is that great light that frees us from the burden of oppression and fear of death. Be convinced just as Paul writes, “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers,... nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord.”

So we look forward to celebrate soon with great joy Jesus’ birth in a stable on one of the darkest nights of the year in our hemisphere. “For a child is born to us, a son is given us, upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful.” Come, Lord Jesus, come! Bring us light and peace, forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation, and hope for a new world to come.

To you Prince of Peace, with the Father and the Spirit, be praise, honor, glory, thanksgiving and glad obedience, now and forever, AMEN.