

## **Bringing Comfort**

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8

### **Intro**

Today we are looking at the second of our Advent themes: Bringing Comfort. Advent, as you know, is a time when we prepare ourselves to celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Christ-Child. The problem is our preparations seem to focus around holiday plans, presents and food, baking cakes and mince pies and, as an extra bonus for us church folk – planning and practising for a variety of the Christmas services!

But this morning we have the opportunity to step aside, to be quiet and to focus on the deeper realities of what God was doing at that first Christmas and what it means for us today. Today I want to explore how the coming of Jesus brings comfort by looking at what God is saying to us through his prophet Isaiah, in 40:1-11, and then see how we can apply the truths we find there to our own situation today.

But first, let's pray.

**Prayer:** Lord, we know that whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May Your Holy Spirit speak to us this morning so that our minds may be renewed and our lives transformed as we are shaped by your Word into the people you have called us to be. Through Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen

### **Isaiah 40:1-11**

A few weeks ago John and I went to a meeting at the Cathedral to hear Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo who is closely associated with Barnabas Fund. What we heard was very disturbing and very challenging. Patrick spoke about the rise of humanism as the new civic religion in place of Christianity, the increasing antagonism towards Christian beliefs, and the weakening of the Church in the West as it is permeated by consumerism and post-modern thinking. Christendom – the time when society by and large called itself Christian – has long gone. Our numbers are declining and some have even predicted a date when the Anglican Church will cease to exist. Patrick goes so far as to suggest the possible death of Western Christianity as a whole. It is not hard to feel that we are facing hard times in the future.

Well, the message in Isaiah 40 was given to people in a very similar situation. In the 160 years between Ch 39 and Ch 40 Judah had undergone a massive reversal of fortune. She had suffered a devastating incursion by the Assyrians and then a full-blown conquest by the Babylonians. As a result the last of her kings had died in exile, Jerusalem was in ruins and the Temple was totally destroyed and burnt. The people are scattered: many are in exile in Babylon while those remaining in the land have intermarried with foreign settlers and live in poverty. As a people they are struggling to maintain their identity. It is to Jews in this situation that Isaiah speaks.

### **1-2**

Comfort, comfort my people says your God.  
Speak to Jerusalem's heart and call out to her  
That her hard service is at an end  
That her sin has been paid for  
That she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

Isaiah's message is a message of comfort – and he repeats it twice over “Comfort, comfort, my people.” Why give this message at this time? Well, the exile has forced Judah to face up to its failings and recognise that its troubles are largely of its own making; it had failed to listen to God's warnings and continued on a path of disobedience. C. S. Lewis wisely said: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” C. S. Lewis *Problem of Pain*. The experience of exile has had a profound impact on God's people and now at last they are ready to hear his fresh word to them - and it is a word of comfort.

This is deeply significant. Previously the people of Jerusalem had expressed their grief in a series of poems, and their laments had a recurring phrase: “There is none to comfort her.” (Lamentations 1:2, 9, 17, 21). The city is likened to a woman who has lost husband and children and sits desolate feeling abandoned even by her God. Yahweh/God had in fact declared in Hosea 1:9: “You are not my people and I am not your God.”. It seemed as though the covenant relationship was over – for Israel in 721BC and for Judah in 587 BC. Not only were they going through hard times but, more importantly, they felt that God had abandoned them. All hope was gone.

But now a voice declares that the time for lament is over: “Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God – says is in the present tense – it is not something God said once to the people back then it is something God keeps on saying to his people, something he is saying to us, especially if we are going through a time of hardship or difficulty, and even more so if we feel God has given up on us.

**What then is this comfort?** Well, it is more than tea and sympathy – though there are times when tea and sympathy are appropriate responses – but this comfort is something stronger. Remember comfort = cum forte – with strength. “Encourage my people; give them fresh heart” might be a good way of expressing it. In fact the phrase that is translated ‘Speak tenderly’ or ‘speak kindly’ actually says: ‘speak to Jerusalem's heart.’ And this is not to be a quiet murmuring of soothing words but a proclamation (v2), a loud declaration clearly stated. Remember too, the heart in Hebrew thinking is more the mind and will than the emotions so the comforting of Jerusalem involves giving her some facts to think about so that she can respond accordingly. Paul says in Romans 12 that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, as we learn to live in the truth of what God says to us. One commentator puts it like this:

“Isaiah's new message is for people whose whole world has been shattered. And for people like that, cheap comfort is not only a waste of time, it is cruel. Comfort that is not grounded in reality is no comfort at all. But the word that Isaiah is commissioned to bring them is not like that at all; it is based on truth at every point.” (BST Barry Webb)

So, what are these truths:

**They are still God's people.** God has allowed disasters to come upon them but he has not abandoned them. Back when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt God heard their cry:

The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their

suffering. <sup>8</sup> So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Ex 3:7-8). He is still the same God.

**Their hard service is at an end.** God’s people have been going through a hard time – hard service suggests it is like the toughness of military service. But now that’s all over. Enough is enough.

**Their sin has been paid for.** In the context of ritual sacrifice this refers to an offering which was acknowledged as a satisfactory payment for the offense committed (Lev 1:4). Judah has in fact received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins – probably indicating a full or ample, equivalent and appropriate penalty. God does not turn a blind eye on errant behaviour – there are consequences as Judah had discovered – but the penalty has been paid. More on this later.

God’s word of comfort to his people is that the past is behind them, they have been forgiven and, in the rest of the passage, we shall see that there is hope that the future will be different.

### 3-5

Verses 3-5 deal with what has to be done to prepare for that future. At first glance this seems to be about road building but the people Isaiah was writing to would have been quick to pick up the clues. When do you have to worry about the state of the road? When someone important is coming. Isaiah’s voice is acting like the herald that went on ahead to announce a royal visit and tell the people to make sure that the road was fit for a king to travel on.

Yahweh is returning to take up residence in Jerusalem again so the royal route through the desert has to be prepared for him to travel along. The road is not in the first instance a road for the exiles to travel back on but for Yahweh to return so that he can be present with his people again. In Ezekiel 10 the prophet is given a devastating vision of the glory of the Lord leaving the temple in Jerusalem but now he is coming back, and his glory will again be plain for all to see.

Then, tucked in at the end of v5 is a solemn little phrase: “for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” – just in case they are tempted to wonder whether after all this time in exile anything can really change.

**6-8** In fact in verses 6-8 I almost seem to hear the voice of a tui – not the bird, the billboard: ‘Yeah right. - ‘What makes you think things are going to work out this time?’ After all “All people are like grass.” Human beings are transitory, ephemeral, and unreliable. They start off fresh and green but end up withering in the searing heat – a bit like our lawn – or the seed that fell on rocky ground. How many of us look at Jacinda Ardern and her new government and wonder whether they are going to be able to deliver on all their promises. I hope they do, but it’s only natural to have some doubts as to whether they will deliver or whether it will be the same old same old.. So our tui voice wonders whether we have the necessary staying power; the constancy or faithfulness –the word is ‘hesed,’ the same word that’s used to describe God’s covenant love for his people. And that’s the thing isn’t it? We don’t have staying power, but what comes to pass isn’t dependent on human effort and resolve - v8 – “The grass withers and the flower fades BUT the word of our God will stand for ever.” The word of God is his spoken expression of his will, and like God himself it is utterly reliable. “What Yahweh says remains valid because of who he is, and he has

the power to achieve what he has determined.” We too can draw comfort from the enduring word of God and trust that what he promises he will deliver.

All of this is good news for the exiles and they are told to pass it on.

**V9-11** Zion/Jerusalem is being called to be the messenger – the bringer of good news to the surrounding towns. They are told to speak up and not be afraid . To get up high and to shout as loudly as they can! And what is the good news? Behold your God! Look out – God’s coming! God is coming and Isaiah gives us a picture of him coming in a triumphal procession – coming in strength and power with the spoils of victory – most probably a reference to the rescued exiles who will soon return to Jerusalem.

But also he comes as a shepherd. Unlike their past leaders who neglected to look after the flock and grew rich at their expense. (Jer 23:1-3; Ezek 34:11-16), God will shepherd his flock, providing them with food for the journey. He has special concern for the young, the weak and the vulnerable, carrying them “in his arms” that is in the fold in his cloak which forms a roomy pocket in which he carries those too weak to walk. In the NT we see Jesus as the good shepherd who knows his sheep by name and is prepared to lay down his life for his sheep.

Bruggemann concludes: “Yahweh is strong enough to emancipate, gentle enough to attend to wants and needs.”

So, what have we discovered by looking at Isaiah 40 and how is it relevant to us today?

### **Application**

Isaiah’s message was addressed to God’s people in exile in Babylon, centuries ago but, as we said at the beginning, our situation is in some ways similar and the word of comfort that Isaiah brings can speak to us as well. It can apply to us as individuals as well as a community of Christian people but we see it through the fuller understanding that the NT gives us. I’m sure you are already aware that OT prophecies often have an immediate application, find further fulfilment in the time of Jesus, and will have a final and complete fulfilment when Jesus returns and heaven comes to earth.

So what truths have we discovered about God and about ourselves as God’s people that will help us to face the situation(s) we find ourselves in today.

First and foremost, Isaiah’s message is one of **comfort**: comfort that is based not on feelings but on facts; not on what we as frail human beings can accomplish or bring about but on what God has said he will do.

Secondly it is a message of **reassurance** that says no matter what has happened in the past the covenant relationship is not over, we are still God’s people no matter what has happened or is happening to us. And with regard to the future, Paul tells us that nothing, absolutely nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8)

Isaiah's message of comfort is also a **message of grace**, of **forgiveness** freely given for any wrong doing in our past.. In Isaiah 53 this is spelled out more fully in a passage we are very familiar with:

“But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.”

As Christians we see this as referring to Jesus. In Matthew 1:21 the angel tells Joseph to name the baby Jesus “because he will save his people from their sins.” and this is fulfilled in Christ's death on the cross. “He died for our sins” (1Cor 15:3). Or, as the PB puts it: he (Jesus) is the full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.

I appreciate the fact that I belong to a church tradition that, every week, presents God's offer of forgiveness to those that are willing to confess their sins and to seek to change the way they have been living.

This is the heart of our faith: “This, you see, is how much God loved the world: enough to give hi only special son, so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age. After all, God didn't send his son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world could be saved by him. (John 3:16-17. Tom Wright)

So Isaiah's message of comfort is one of reassurance and grace and it is also a message of **hope** that God is on the move and things can be different. But this is also a challenge: the road need to be made ready. If we turn to our NT reading we find that John the Baptist is the herald or forerunner and the preparation needed is repentance, a change of heart and mind. We can see Advent as an opportunity for spiritual preparation, a time when we can address any issues that are like deep ravines running within us, or like mountainous obstacles that block our way to a closer relationship with God.

For Isaiah's message is also a **promise of God's presence**. God is coming back to Jerusalem. In the NT Jesus is Immanuel, 'God with us.' John tells us that “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” (He moved into the neighbourhood as The Message puts it) and we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Jn 1:14.

This is a message of **good news**. Isaiah describes God's return as a triumphal procession and calls on the people to shout out the good news. The word Isaiah uses is *bašar* which becomes euangelion in Greek (40:9; 41:27;52:7; also 60:6; 61:1) and is picked up and used by Mark in our NT reading – Mark1:1 – “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the son of God.” It is an announcement that things have changed – people are free and being made free from all that enslaves them. As we read the gospel stories we see Jesus interacting with people and doing just that – bringing healing and wholeness into broken lives, and he is still at work doing that today. It is a message that we have a responsibility to share with others today – and hopefully we will in the different services and meetings we have in the lead up to Christmas.

Finally, the message of comfort that Isaiah brings tells us that it is possible to escape circumstances in which we feel there is no comfort, no protector, no-one powerful enough to intervene. We can take it to heart as individuals going through hard times, and also as communities of faith that feel threatened, even despairing of the future. What does the future hold for the Church in the West, for us? I don't know - but I take comfort from God's word to us through the prophet Isaiah and the hope for the future that I find there.

Bruggemann sums it up like this:

"The good news asserts that the world is [being] changed by God. It is no longer the way we have long taken it to be, ordered by an arrogance that required despair. On this word of comfort hangs not only the future for the Jews of Isaiah's day but also the future of the world. It is an exile-ending word." Amen