

Prepare a road for the Lord

Readings: Isaiah 40:1 – 11, Mark 1:1 – 8

Questions and Ideas for sermons for January please

Some of us got to meet Govinda Regmi, known as Tika, when he visited Lunch on the Hill one day with Gerrie Mead, our Diocesan Social Services Enable.

Since coming to Nelson, Tika has worked at Redwood Cellar, tutored in the ESOL program, chaired the Bhutanese – Nepali society here in Nelson and is currently training as a social worker.

Before coming to New Zealand in 2010, Tika spent 18 years in a refugee camp in Nepal. Camp conditions were initially rife with malnutrition and disease. Violence against women and children, and marginalization resulting in a degree of radicalization remained serious issues. Overpopulation was a significant problem until about 2006. However there were relatively good education services provided within the refugee camps. [

Tika managed to keep hope alive while in the camp. He hoped for release from camp conditions for him, his wife and their daughter. He hoped for a new life in another country some day. Now settled in Nelson, he believes that with hard work and perseverance, he will achieve success.

As a refugee it would have been easy to give up hope. This section of Isaiah is written to refugees also. It's written when the Jewish exiles found themselves in Babylon. And Isaiah is charged with bringing them hope and comfort.

We all need hope don't we? We all need comfort? And so do many around us. Christmas time is not a time of joy for everyone. For many people Christmas is a time of mixed emotions at best. Many people grieve more at Christmas time than any other time of the year.

The Scripture readings are charged with bringing hope and comfort to those whose hope might be fading. Surely we have a part to play a part in that. Surely Christians more than anyone else in the world, ought to ones who offer genuine comfort and an abiding hope.

Remember what St Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... 1 Thess 1:3

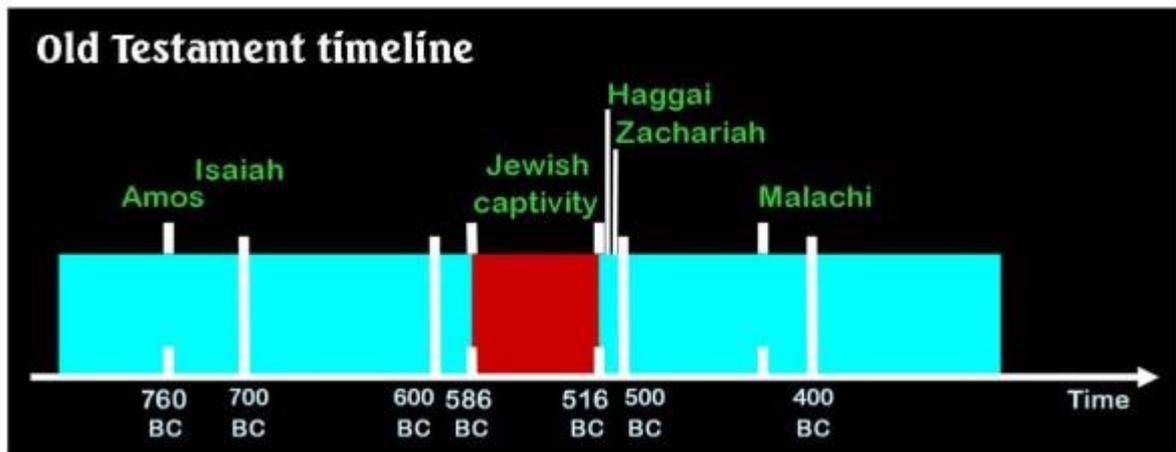
And Jesus himself said "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."
Mt 5:4

So comfort is not a mere possibility. It is a promise of God. Those who mourn will be comforted. No question.

Actually I have a question. How will they be comforted? Hopefully we'll go some way to answering that in a moment.

First a bit of overview:

The book of Isaiah is a call to God's people in Israel and Judah (they had split apart as a nation by this time). They've been unfaithful to God so they need to repent and come back to him. Isaiah declares the promises of the coming Messiah, Emmanuel, the one who will bring complete restoration. The prophet speaks God's words of condemnation, conviction, and ultimately great hope.



Punishment will come in the form of capture by the Babylonians and exile in that strange land – strange in the sense that it is foreign to them. The second half of the book begins with Chapter 40. Here the hope of the return from exile and the restoration of Israel begins with God telling the prophet to bring comfort to God's people. The outline goes kind of like this:

God	Comfort my people
Isaiah	How?
God	Speak to them
Isaiah	What will I say?
God	Their time of punishment is over. Hope is on its way. So you make a way, a road, a pathway for me, (us) to come to them.
Isaiah	How do I do that?
God	Speak to them
Isaiah	What will I say?
God	Tell them their punishment is over. It was temporary. Bring them good news. And be bold about it! Point them to me! Point them to my power. Point them to my compassion.

The conversation is between Isaiah and God. That conversation is partially worked out as the people return from exile. It is more fully worked out through the coming of John the Baptist who is also to point God's people to Jesus.

We know that both Isaiah and John the Baptist didn't feel worthy to do this.

Isaiah: Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.
Is 6:5

John the B: After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. Mk 1:7

Both men were called to bring comfort and hope. Both realised they would only be able to do this imperfectly. Yet both went ahead anyway.

Isaiah: Here am I, send me. Is 6:8

John: came, baptising in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mk 1:4

Of course they weren't worthy. Can you think of anyone who is worthy? Apart from maybe the Assistant Priest – he might be. Actually none of us is are we? Just as well God used imperfect people.

The strange thing is that not only does the Lord use us, somehow he esteems us highly.

We like Isaiah, and like John the Baptist, are charged with bringing comfort and hope to those around us. Like Isaiah we might ask how, but we've seen that the answer lies in making a road for Jesus to walk across.

We don't have to have all the answers. We don't do the work of road construction on our own. Have you ever seen a solitary person making a road? There is always a gang of road workers isn't there? Before they even come on the scene there is a team of engineers and surveyors who choose the best route and make the plans. Then a clear path has to be made; everything that is in the way must be removed. Trees are pulled down, hills are flattened, valleys are filled in, and banks are made secure so they won't collapse on the road. Then loads and loads of rocks and shingle are brought in. All of that has to be flattened with heavy machinery. Finally the bitumen is brought in. Depending on the mix, that is sometimes rolled again. Usually a few of them are simply leaning on shovels watching the others. Perhaps for our purposes we might imagine those are the pray-ers – called to intercede and support the work of the gang. Road making involves teams of individual people and they don't all do obvious things. Certainly John the Baptist had a team of people who worked with him.

Notice after the preparation has been done, the Lord reveals his glory and everyone will see it. Is 40:5

We don't have to do everything. We all have different spiritual gifts; we all mix in different circles of people; we are all in different circumstances. We don't have to be a bitumen mixer if we are a planner. We don't have to be a tree puller outerer if we are a tea maker. All we need to do is our tiny bit and then point to the Lord. It is the Lord who ultimately offers comfort and hope by revealing his glory, that is himself.

The Sovereign Lord comes with power and his arm rules for him. He is ready to go into action on behalf of those who are in need.

The Lord is able to bring the fulfilment of hope because he is strong and he is compassionate. Whenever it talks about the 'arm' of the Lord, it is about muscle power – power to make a real difference. Power that is not abusive or controlling but loving and kind and compassionate.

The Lord comes in power and he comes tending his flock like a shepherd. The Lord cares in an overarching kind of way. He cares for specific needs also. He gathers the lambs in his arms. The Lord cares for the carers as well as those in need. He gently leads those who have young.

Somehow we have the right balance in our attitude so that we know we know we are amazingly loved by the King and that gives us the confidence to speak boldly. "Life up your voice and do not be afraid" says the Lord. We need to be seen and heard, yet we are not the focus. The Lord is always the focus. Our words and our deeds always point to Jesus. The honour and the glory is always his.

Perhaps the work of making a road for the Lord is about doing what he commands, saying what he says and then, getting out of the way.

Someone asked me the other day, what they should say when someone asks them why God lets bad things happen even when Christians are praying. (There are answers to that question. It's outside our scope for today though.) Perhaps we would answer the question as honestly and sincerely as we can. But our answers will always be partial. Perhaps the best answer to any question is to encourage people to ask God the questions themselves.

When we answer, we may provide food for thought. We may be right some of the time. How much better for those with questions to encounter the living God themselves. Yes we need teaching and theology etc. We also need to experience the comfort and hope that God brings. Everyone needs to experience that comfort and hope directly from God. Sometimes making a road is getting out of the way and letting God speak for himself.

We all need comfort and hope and that is what the Lord wants to bring to everyone. We can help by preparing the way, or making a road for the Lord. That involves teams of individuals. Individually we all have work to do in preparing a road for the Lord to come to us. He wants to come to us as well as others.

When we have done our allocated tasks, which all point to the Lord, we simply get out of the way. We allow the Lord to walk down the road towards those who need him. We allow him to reveal his glory. We do some preparation but it is the Lord who reveals his glory directly to those who are ready to receive it.

He wants to relate directly, in power and in tenderness, to all people. Let's pause and ask two questions:

Lord what are you saying to me/ to us?

What do you want me/us to do about it?