

Isaiah 40:1-11 (Mark 1:1-8) – ‘A tender voice’ – GOD REVEALS

‘It’s Christmas time, and there’s no need to be afraid. At Christmas time, we let in light and we banish shade.’ Anyone recognise that? (Band Aid) It goes on: ‘There’s a world outside your window, and it’s a world of dread and fear. Where the only water flowing is the bitter sting of tears...’

Ambiguous time of year. Exciting – await birth of the Saviour...

- Focus on good things – family, celebration, sharing gifts.
- School assembly this week – Advent = waiting – but good waiting. Contrast waiting for food or bus or Black Friday cheap TVs with waiting for presents or special visitor.

But light shines in darkness – can’t ignore it. ‘The world of dread and fear.’

- Ebola. Islamic State. Describe F1VE initiative (1 in 5 MK kids in poverty).
- Other signs that our society in a mess – Black Friday violence (contrast with Syrian refugees running out of food); ‘Day of the dead’ at school.

As Carolyn said last week – not new. Isaiah 40 written at a time of crisis. Might have been written as Judah clung on by her fingernails c.700AD, more probably in exile (chs 40-66). Worst had already happened. Nation destroyed, people carried off to slavery. ‘Where only water flowing is bitter sting of tears’ – or as Psalm 137 says – ‘By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.’ The bitter sting of tears.

(Happy day as celebrate baptism, but...) Perhaps you feel that today – some area of sadness – personal; or as look at world. Let Isaiah 40 speak to you today (page 724). 4 C’s in passage:

Comfort – wonderful start to chapter – turning point of book. After doom and gloom of exile and disaster, this extraordinary word appears – Comfort. In fact, I think God probably knew that Israel wouldn’t believe it first time, so he says it again: READ v1.

Like that moment in films – key characters have reached rock bottom and now only way is up. Same here. Or like a naughty child who’s been disciplined, God reaches down, picks them up and says: READ v2a. ‘It’s OK,’ God says. ‘It’s OK.’ Comfort, comfort my people.

Advent is lots of things – but it starts here, as a word of Comfort. *Something better is coming.* This is not all there is. Ebola is not all there is. Islamic State is not all there is. Poverty and hardship and disease and violence and judgement is not all there is. Comfort, comfort my people. Something better is coming.

So easy to be distracted at this time of year. Let’s make sure to take moments to remember this fundamental truth, this word of hope – ‘Comfort, comfort my people says your God.’

Calling: v3 ‘a voice of one calling’ – what call? READ v3-5. What a promise! Comfort that God promises not just a shoulder to cry on. *Something new is coming.* Something big. Something that reshapes the landscape – raises the valleys and squashes the mountains.

Used to this MK – endless reshaping of landscape:

- Oakgrove
- Kingston – watch as Magna Park – ground smoothed for warehouse, and new road ('highway in desert'?!)

Spiritual re-shaping here – rough ground levelled. Something new is coming; stuff is going to get sorted, says God – in fact he's going to reveal his glory (v5)

Looks forward to John the Baptist: quotes this passage in Mark 1 – 'And so John came...' v6
Description perhaps not very comforting! But message was: READ Mark 1:7-8. What does it mean for God's glory in Isaiah 40 to be revealed? Well here it is: new king coming, who baptises with Holy Spirit.

It's what we pray for Toyosi – baptised not just with water but with Holy Spirit – that's what empowers a life. That's why we baptise not just in name of Jesus, but in name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As pray that for Toyosi, let's also remind ourselves that Christmas is a time when God reveals his glory, he does something new. Easy to get used to message isn't it, to let it wash over. But *Christmas is revolution*. The ground is being levelled and God's glory is being revealed. And the world will never be the same again.

Crying – READ v6. Important reminder here. Lot of wishful thinking at Christmas, lot of sentimental slush too. We all like it (maybe not all) – but need to remember why Saviour is needed. Not all peace love and flowers – READ v7. Two reminders here: (a) of our own mortality – v7a, popular idea e.g. in psalms; (b) also of our spiritual fragility – v7b – i.e. it doesn't last. Even our best efforts eventually falter. We need help, we need grace. We need something more enduring, something like word of God: READ v8b.

Another useful reminder on this special day of baptism. Primarily celebrate God's faithfulness, not ours. Baptism 'works' because God's word stands forever, *his* love doesn't fail, *he* is perfect. Not about our promises, although of course we make them sincerely and I know how much God means to the family. And yes we celebrate that. But none of us are 100% devoted to God all the time: 'the grass withers and the flowers fall'... But there is hope, there is something we can rely on: 'the word of our God stands forever'. *Something sure is coming*.

Good news for Israel – worry: what if not fulfilled quickly? Well it's God's word, it'll happen, don't you worry about that.

Good news for anyone being baptised – God promises to save all who put their faith and trust in him. Not a free pass, but wonderfully reassuring to know it doesn't rely on our ability to be good but on God's total goodness and his promises.

Good news for all of us. Christmas is as much about grace as Easter. Imagine what it cost God to be born as a human. But he did it anyway. And today we can know that despite our failings, God's promises are sure, his word stands forever. There is no sin which can't be forgiven, no lapse which can't be put right. **Come back to God** – word for some of us – come back to God. Waiting for you, your past does not have to determine your future. There is hope. Comfort, comfort my people says your God.

Coming – READ v10a. One final word, but one which needs to be said. Great passage – a passage of comfort, of a new calling, God's glory being revealed, and a voice which cries out that God's word stands forever, it will happen.

But when it comes, what will it be like? Another ambiguity at heart of Christmas. Comes as a baby – helpless and fragile. Like to emphasise – often for good reasons – something in us that responds to the arrival of a new baby. But also bad – makes God small. We like God as a baby, can't tell us what to do. Jeremy Clarkson 'little baby Jesus'.

Let's not forget that also a power in this story. Two miraculous births – Elizabeth and Mary; angels visiting shepherds; people journeying hundreds of miles and kneeling in worship (ever thought how ridiculous that is); Herod so worried that orders a massacre. Isaiah prophesied that someone powerful is coming... and this little baby has power! And the people at the time recognised it.

And maybe we need to recognise it again too this Christmas. Yes, we adore the baby in the manger. But we also worship Christ the Lord. 'Come and behold him, born the king of angels.'

4 words for us this morning:

- A word of comfort – something better is coming
- A word of calling – prepare the way for the Lord, the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit – something new is coming
- A word that cries out – the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever – something sure is coming
- A word that comes with power – someone powerful is coming. This is no ordinary baby, the glory of the Lord is being revealed.

May these words speak to us today. Comfort, comfort my people. Come back to God. Something better is coming. In fact, something better is already here.