

Sunday 3rd December – Advent Sunday (1st of Advent): Isaiah 40:1-5 ‘A word of comfort’

Every so often in history, an event occurs which is so catastrophic that it defines the story of a particular nation, and becomes the lens through which everything is interpreted. For the English, for example, think 1066 and the conquest by the Normans; for France, think 1789 and the revolution; for the Japanese, think 1945 and Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

For the people of Israel, the year is 586BC, a year which both shattered and thereafter defined both their national and religious identity. These are the chilling words at the end of the Second Book of Chronicles (2 Chron 36:14-20):

¹⁵ ‘...all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the LORD, which he had consecrated in Jerusalem. ¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling-place. ¹⁶ But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.

¹⁷ ‘He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁸ He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD’s temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. ¹⁹ They set fire to God’s temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. ²⁰ He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power.’

It is hard to overemphasise just how shattering this sequence of events was – God’s chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, the inheritors of the Law and the promises of God, had been judged and conquered. True, it had been promised repeatedly by the prophets for well over a century, unless the people mended their ways – Isaiah was the first great prophet of the Southern Kingdom of Judah from about 740-700BC and was very clear that this was what lay in store for God’s people. Chapter 39 of his book finishes with this warning to King Hezekiah (vv5-7):

‘Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: the time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.’

Hezekiah’s response is significant (v8): “The word of the Lord you have spoken is good,” Hezekiah replied. For he thought, “There will be peace and security in my lifetime.” In other words, I’m alright Jack – at least my reputation will be intact! And, sadly, it’s that kind of attitude that led to the calamitous events more than a hundred years later: a kingdom destroyed, a people subjugated and a nation in crisis.

All of which makes the first words of Isaiah 40 so powerful, so important (v1): **‘Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.’ This is a prophecy for a people in exile; a people hurting, bewildered, unsure of their future. And into their pain, their crisis, God speaks a word of comfort.**

Before we delve in, let's acknowledge that the authorship of chapters 40-66 of Isaiah is hotly debated. It's clear that it is directly addressed to God's people after their exile, which is well after Isaiah had died, and you can argue the toss as to whether this is a different, later prophet in the tradition of Isaiah, or Isaiah himself speaking a word for God's people whose truth would only become clear in time to come. Either way, the point is that the message is the same, it doesn't really matter that we don't know for sure which of those scenarios is true. Isaiah 40-66 is the most important prophetic text in the whole Old Testament and has been treated as the word of God ever since it was first written down, and indeed is quoted numerous times by New testament writers – and that's good enough for us.

And it's clear why this portion of scripture is both so treasured and also quoted so much at key seasons of the Church's year, like Advent and Lent – because more than any other part of the Old Testament it points towards Jesus, towards God's inbreaking kingdom and rescue plan for the whole world. And it begins with a word of comfort: 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.'

This word of comfort is firstly a word of restoration (v2): 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.' Notice that this restoration is both spiritual and material. Her sins have been forgiven – indeed, the Lord will reward them double for all they've forfeited as a result of their wrongdoing. But also, her hard service has been completed. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied that Israel would spend 70 years in exile after it was conquered by Babylon, and this prophecy encourages the people to hold on, because this 70 years would come to an end and there would be hope. Her hard service would be completed. And from the ashes a new hope would arise.

But they're not there yet: and so alongside restoration, **this word of comfort is also a word of preparation (v3):** 'A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."' God's people were to recover their identity, but in the short term 'preparing the way for the Lord' meant a recovery of obedience to the Law, to God's purposes for their lives. Just as the prophets were traditionally the ones who wandered in the wilderness calling people back to God, so now a new prophetic voice was doing the same. Return to the Lord, re-fashion your identity as his beloved people – for God is about to do a new thing.

But this new thing extends beyond the bounds of the sixth century. True, this word would originally have been interpreted as a call to repentance and renewal for the people of that time – but from our perspective now, it's not hard to see how this prophecy, if you like, spilled over the banks of history and flooded the future. Because **this new thing that God would do was not just for Israel, but for the world (v5):** 'the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.'

And so, five and a half centuries later, John comes, the voice calling in the wilderness, preparing the way, and summoning people to repentance and renewal. This is why John is so significant: as soon as he arrives, the people are in 'Isaiah 40 mode' – the new thing is coming, the way is being prepared! And John is very clear that this is the case (Mark 1:7-8): 'After me comes the one more powerful than I... he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

This word of comfort points forward to Jesus – and so it makes a perfect start to our Advent journey. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. And **this same God speaks comfort into our lives too**. If you're facing challenges, even crises, at the moment, know that this word of comfort is for you. It is a word of restoration, a word of preparation. Our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. He has not forgotten you. He is with you. 'Comfort, comfort my people – the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.' Amen.