

**SERMON – 29/1/23**  
**'Comfort'**

Isaiah 40:1-17

“Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain and proclaim the good news! Call out with a loud voice, Zion; announce the good news! Speak out and do not be afraid. Tell the towns of Judah that their God is coming!” (Isaiah 40:9)

I wonder what comes to mind for you when you hear the word 'comfort'? I have to say I find myself immediately thinking about mattresses and pillows so perhaps that says something about me and about how much I am looking forward to a week off. What comes to *your* mind when you think about comfort. Maybe you think about the kind of clothing you like to wear, or your favourite chair (it would have to be a seat at home, though, because you couldn't possibly think about being comfortable in church). Maybe the idea of comfort brings something else to mind altogether – people these days talk about comfort eating, and 'retail therapy' is a thing for many who are looking for an escape from life's other pressures (not that it does it for me!)

My dictionary defines comfort firstly as a state of ease or of well-being, but it also speaks of comfort in terms of relief from affliction or grief, and maybe that is how we are inclined to think of it in a faith context.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” So begins this morning's chapter from Isaiah. Jesus famously said at the opening of His Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.” But what are we actually looking for when we feel the need for comfort in the face of affliction or grief? I might be bold enough to suggest that for many people, one of the primary things they are looking for in an experience of church generally and a Sunday service in particular is comfort of some kind, and that in some cases that may lead us to listen out for what we think will make us comfortable rather than for what God may actually be seeking to give to us for our ultimate and greater well-being, something which at least in the short term may leave us feeling far from comfortable.

There is a good example of that in the immediately previous chapter, where envoys from Babylon have come to express the good wishes of the king of Babylon to King Hezekiah in Jerusalem following his recovery from serious illness. Hezekiah is greatly perked up by this visit and gladly shows the envoys round the palace and the storehouses which are filled with silver, gold, spices and fine olive oil. After they have gone, the prophet Isaiah comes to see the king and as ever he has a message for him from God. "Hear the word of the Lord Almighty, says Isaiah. The time will 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." (Isaiah 39:5-7)

Hezekiah's response to this message from God bears sober reflection. "The word of the Lord you have spoken is good. There will be peace and security in my lifetime." (Isaiah 39:8) Notwithstanding the salvation the people of Judah have experienced in the face of the Assyrians during Hezekiah's reign, the prophet is proclaiming that they won't be saved when the Babylonians come. But Hezekiah takes comfort in the fact that it won't happen on his watch – we'll be alright for now. And how many of us do the same kind of thing, coveting comfort and reassurance, ease and well-being for ourselves even if those who come after us will pay the price for it.

So we turn into chapter 40 and its opening words are music to our longing ears: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Scholars have long argued about whether the Book of Isaiah is the work of a single author or whether there were two or even three 'Isaiahs' behind what we have in our Bibles. Suffice it to say it's not an open and shut case despite what some would have you believe. What is certainly true is that there is a turning point between the end of ch.39 and the start of ch.40, with the second part of the book looking to a more distant future compared to the first part which is addressed directly into Isaiah's own context. It's a happy co-incidence that the first part of the book has 39 chapters and the second part 27 just as the Old Testament has 39 books and the New Testament 27 – of course the numbering

of chapters and the pulling together of the books of the Bible into their final form is largely a human endeavour rather than a purely divine one but there is a point to be drawn from it, namely that (in the words of Paul's second letter to Timothy) "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim.3:16). Just as we have found the good news about Jesus so far in Isaiah, so also we will find it here in the promise of comfort not so much in its physical sense but in its deepest sense because here again and again we find Jesus.

There is much that could be said but I limit myself to five themes that jump out from the verses that we have read this morning and that build a picture of what it means to find true comfort. Listen, then, for what God may be saying into your particular circumstances today even if it makes you feel uncomfortable initially because you can be sure that any immediate challenge is designed to lead you to the place of supreme comfort, to the place of ultimate ease and well-being which is in the presence of the Lord Almighty.

Firstly, Isaiah speaks about an end to suffering and an end to punishment and he proclaims the forgiveness of sins. This takes us right to the very heart of what Jesus came to accomplish – the reversal of Adam and Eve's catastrophic fall from grace and as a result the end of all that brings such grief to the world and to each one of us both as we sin ourselves and as we experience the fruits of the sins of others - 'no more death or mourning or crying or pain' we are promised in the book of Revelation, a promise that has its germination in words later in Isaiah. If you are looking for true and lasting comfort then acknowledge the awful reality of your sin and bring it to God for He alone can deal with it in Christ.

Secondly, Isaiah calls us to prepare the way for the Lord. He calls for nothing short of global revolution: a highway in the desert, the filling of valleys and the levelling of mountains, the removal of rough edges so that people can see the glory of God and discover the way the Lord intends things to be. If you are looking for true comfort then you need to be part of that work of transformation in the world, disturbing the accepted status quo which we are all

far too comfortable (in worldly terms) to challenge. Seek first the Kingdom of God – that is the way to find real comfort.

Isaiah's third thing here is the proclamation of the message – the good news, the Gospel – and that too is where we will find comfort. Except that we shy away from it because it seems to start with so little promise: 'Proclaim that all humans are like grass, they last no longer than wild flowers, they wither and fade.' People are no more enduring than grass, says the Lord – do you find that comforting? Probably not, for it is a call to stare our mortality right in the face, but it leads us to the hope that is ours in Christ: "People are no more enduring than grass. Yes grass withers and flowers fade *but* the word of our God endures for ever." (Isaiah 40:8) You see our hope is not in what we can accomplish but in what *God* has promised. If you are looking for true comfort then lift your eyes above the horizons of this world – God says: 'Do not be afraid'.

Time is pressing on so let me take Isaiah's final two thoughts together – he expands on the final one in the rest of the chapter, namely that God is in charge and that the nations are as nothing, like a drop of water or a speck of dust – although the might of advancing armies brings dreadful terror and we cannot see how atrocities can be overturned, do not be afraid but be comforted in this, that while the kingdoms of this world rise and fall, God's promises endure. But although God is mighty beyond our imagining, the Lord of heaven and earth, Isaiah paints a picture of the Lord that is finally revealed to us in fulness in Jesus – the Sovereign Lord who is mighty in power but who takes care of His flock like a shepherd, gathering and carrying the lambs and gently leading their mothers. If you are looking for true comfort then hold those two thoughts together – that the Mighty One is tenderly holding *you* and seeking to lead you into fulness of life.

So let me simply close with the words Isaiah writes at the conclusion of this wonderful chapter, words which have thrilled hearts in all kinds of situations of struggle for more than two and a half thousand years and which I pray will bring true comfort to each and every one of you this morning as you rest in the care of the Good Shepherd:

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary and His understanding no-one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint."

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.