

All Saints Talk for 05 May 2024

Dave Phillips

The Power of Godly Vision

‘Strengthening Vision

Isaiah 40:1-8 & 28-31

Comfort for God’s People.

*Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.*

² *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.*

A voice of one calling:

*“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD^[a];
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.^[b]*

⁴ *Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.*

⁵ *And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

⁶ *A voice says, “Cry out.”*

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

*“All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.*

⁷ *The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.*

⁸ *The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever.”*

*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.
²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
³¹ 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.*

I don't know whether anyone here this morning has had to be the bearer of bad news? For those of you who don't know me, when I'm not writing sermons, I work hard in my own company, which is involved in garden machinery. I occasionally have the unenviable task of explaining to customers that their lawnmowers won't be ready in time for the weekend – you'd think I'd declared the dawning of the apocalypse - or that the drive cable they'd ordered and agreed to pay extra, for a guaranteed 'AM delivery', had turned up at a mower shop in the Outer Hebrides by mistake. Bad news like these trifling examples pale into insignificance when compared to the news that was so often imparted by the Old Testament prophets! Whichever one of the sixteen you choose, from Isaiah through to Malachi their message was one which generally began with a warning against God's impending judgement. Prophets stood alongside priests as God's special representatives.

Their role was to speak for God, confronting the people and, more specifically, their leaders, with God's commands and promises. Because of this confrontational stance and people's unwillingness to behave themselves, true prophets weren't always very popular!

This one requires a little poetic licence, but they rarely made it to the top of people's Christmas card lists!!! Whilst their intentions were exemplary, the task at hand must have been one they perhaps may have resented being chosen for! Had I been asked to accompany Jonah for example to proclaim God's judgement by heading due West from Jerusalem into the very heart of the notoriously wicked Assyrian Empire, I would have been two steps ahead of him into that boat heading East!

These were ordinary men of extraordinary faith who each felt called by God to fulfil a task and despite often feeling ill-equipped and nervous, they had the courage of their convictions, and they were obedient to their call.

Callum a couple of weeks ago spoke of what fuelled his own courage, not just to get up and speak in front of you lot, but he described how he felt at the top of St. John's Church in Keynsham when he was about to abseil down for charity. With legs of jelly he meditated on the promise from God that he had nothing to fear and he described how his faith in that promise was his safety rope and, with the absolute assurance that God was right there with him, with extraordinary bravery, and with every fibre in his body screaming at him to descend the tower on the inside not the outside, nevertheless, over the top, and down he went safely to the bottom.

So, the title of this talk is "Strengthening vision – Comfort for God's People". We've travelled through the first thirty-nine chapters of the book of Isaiah, and we've reached a pivotal point, which is Chapter 40. The first three verses, which begin, "Comfort, Comfort My People...", as we all know, Isaiah pinched

from the opening scene of the first part of Handel's Messiah. But leaving that aside and moving very swiftly on, over the past four weeks, we've taken some glorious positives from the book: we've heard Isaiah's vision of hope as he describes, in chapter two, of Jerusalem being renewed and raised up – a city centred around God's peaceful reign, where the Kingdom of heaven reaches out across the earth. We've had a futuristic vision of the mountain of the Lord's temple with people from all over the world streaming up to it to hear and receive God's word as he administers universal truth, justice and peace. We've seen an image of the Kingdom of God under the Messiah's reign where eternal stillness and rest prevail on every side against the storms and traumas of life. We've also been encouraged by Tom Peryer to listen to Gounod's St. Cecilia Mass on YouTube which I've since discovered to be another antidote to the storms and traumas of life.

But the book of Isaiah can be divided up into two sections: the first 39 chapters predominantly contain scathing pronouncements and denunciations as Isaiah, in true prophetic fashion, calls the corrupt leaders of Judah, Israel and the surrounding nations to account and cautions them to repent of their sins. The dominant themes here are conviction of sin and judgement. He warns them that their continuing rebellion against God through their practices of idolatry and oppression of the poor, had rendered the old covenant between them and God, broken and there was a price to be paid; their communities would fragment, and they were to be forced out of the comfort and stability of their homeland to live in exile.

However, as we see, it's here in chapter forty that the book of Isaiah makes a dramatic shift. Someone appears to have pressed fast-forward. I don't really want to dwell too much on the chronology, but there are differing theories regarding the authorship of the book from this point. Suffice it to say that all

the theories consistently acknowledge that by now, Isaiah's earlier prophecies from the previous thirty-nine chapters had come true, and the Israelites were now miserably living outside of their homeland in captivity. It's sadly all too easy for us to imagine the hardship they were having to endure. We turn on our television sets and we're faced with the images of destroyed communities in Palestine and Ukraine and we see the plight of the desperate people even now seeking asylum in scattered parts of the world. How depressing it is to see through the ages how much misery mankind is consistently prepared to inflict upon itself through ignorance or denial of God's Kingdom values. The remaining twenty-seven chapters in the book, however, are mercifully filled with consolation and hope as Isaiah speaks reassuring words of comfort to encourage and strengthen resolve as he begins to unfold God's promise of restoration: *"Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for"*.

These declarations of hope are fundamental to the whole book of Isaiah: the past is past; a new era has begun. Jerusalem and Judah have suffered for so long; the voice that once pronounced judgement now speaks words of comfort, forgiveness and restoration.

Notice here that Isaiah isn't pronouncing words of comfort at the end of the exile. He's not saying now that everything's over people can return home and be happy again. Rather he's addressing them while they're in the midst of their suffering. While they were comfortably living in defiance of God's covenant throughout the last chapters, he was speaking words of conviction. Now they're enduring the consequences of their sin; all they can see is the endless misery that's been surrounding them for such a long time, and they seemingly have no hope. It's here that God shows his love for them by drawing alongside

them in their need and offering them comfort. Now, I don't think the word comfort is to be interpreted here as simply an arm around a shoulder or a hug with the words "Never mind, I'm sure things will be ok; I'll go and put the kettle on", as we might think of it today. Rather, I think it's helpful here to pause briefly and scrutinize the word, 'comfort'. A quick referral to Professor Google tells me that the etymology of the word comes from the Latin 'con', (together) and 'fortis', (strength). So, we see that what God is promising to do here is to give the people strength to endure their suffering. With the words we read in Hebrews, saying that "Jesus Christ is the same today, yesterday and forever", what we can take from this, is that God not only met the Israelites in the midst of their suffering and offered them the strength to endure their hardship, but, in exactly the same way today, if we'll only say yes to him and open our hearts to be receptive to his grace and his love, God will come and meet us in the midst of whatever challenges we're facing and will give to us that exact same strength to endure. The fuel that powers that strength is hope. Hope in the faithful promises of God, such as this we find in Deuteronomy, *"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."* Deuteronomy 31:8.

We can take the words of Isaiah and follow the example of John the Baptist by doing everything in our power to prepare a way for the Lord to come among us and enable all people with whom we come into contact to have a relationship with God for themselves and to receive his grace in all its fullness. For us to prepare the way for the Lord, this "straight highway through the wilderness", the real preparation must firstly take place in our own hearts so that our lives echo the faith to which we attest.

I wonder, through the wilderness in our own lives, how prepared for the Lord we feel here this morning. Are there any obstacles that need to be removed? What are the rough grounds and rugged places that need smoothing out? For me, maybe I'm guilty of cramming so much into a day, I squeeze out the people and things I love and care about the most, including dare I say, God: what about you?

So often the things we commit our lives to and devote so much of our precious time to are just fleeting. The fleeting nature of our existence is contrasted in this passage with the enduring strength of God, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall"

Fleeting...

Our world is filled with so many inconsistencies. Circumstances can change in the blink of an eye instantly unravelling our hopes and plans.

But, reading on, we find the source of our strength and hope: "The word of our God endures forever". The word of our God is the light that carries us through the darkest periods and it's the firm foundation upon which healing, and reconciliation can build. We get that wonderful vision of those placing their hope in the Lord not just renewing their strength but soaring on wings like eagles. This is what it means to leave our lives of exile and receive the forgiveness and grace of our loving father who's calling us to live life – life in all its fullness; the life that Jesus willingly sacrificed everything to give us.

As we subject our ears each day to the deafening noise of life, when adversity strikes and we feel our strength sapping and our confidence and perhaps even our faith failing, let the words of St. Paul resonate loud and clear when he says that:

“Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”, (Romans 8: 38-39).

We’ll leave the last words to Isaiah, whose words from chapter 41 are as relevant to us today as they were to the exiled Jews all those years ago:

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Amen