

2021-12-05 Advent 2

Isaiah 40:1-11 & Luke 1:1-25

40 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.

³ A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

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."

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

Introduction

The second Sunday of Advent is when traditionally we remember the Old Testament Prophets. They were God's messengers who spoke of and prepared the way for the promised Messiah – God's Saviour-King.

Our New Testament reading speaks of the last of those 'Old Testament' style prophets, John the Baptist, who forms a bridge into the new era of the New Testament. The opening chapters of Luke tell of the births of both Jesus and also his cousin, John, who we are told in verse 17 "will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah". Jesus said of John "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist". But more on John next week, the *third* Sunday of Advent.

Our *Old* Testament reading is from Isaiah, who is one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets; he certainly has the longest book! There is a sense in which the book of Isaiah is a bit like the whole Bible in miniature. Where the whole Bible is comprised of 66 books, Isaiah has 66 chapters. And where there are 39 books in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New, the book of Isaiah splits similarly, with the last 27 chapters, 40-66, often called the "New Testament section" of the book.

The passage we read marks a turning point in his extended message – the opening verses of the so-called New Testament section. Both the New Testament and this second part of Isaiah begin with the ministry of John the Baptist – "the voice of one calling in the desert" (Isa 40:3–4 cf Mt 3:1–3), and go on to focus on the life and work of Jesus, God's Messiah.

Part 1 of Isaiah - chapters 1–39 - emphasises God's judgment on his people, but chapters 40–66 sound a different note, one of comfort and redemption. These words were written to encourage the Jewish remnant that would be delivered from the Babylonian captivity after their seventy years of captivity. But the message of Isaiah is not just for that people. There is a sense in which *all* God's people are exiles – strangers in a strange world, waiting and longing for a homecoming. Exile is not just the experience of the people of Israel 2,500 years ago, or other peoples at other periods of history. Exile has been the experience of every human that ever lived since Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden. The words written by Isaiah to an exiled people are relevant to us all.

And so our chapter opens with the well-known words "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God". It is the opening line of an overture that introduces themes that will be picked up in the rest of the book, indeed picked up in the New Testament which describes the coming of God's Messiah and the inauguration of his kingdom. The key themes – messages needing to be heard by people living in exile both then and now – are those of pardon, providence, promise and peace. We will think briefly about each.

1. Pardon (v1-2)

Firstly pardon, which is verses 1-2.

As our services often open with a confession and absolution, of the assurance of sins forgiven because of what Jesus has done for us, so the remnant of Israel who found themselves exiled in Babylon needed an honest appraisal of their situation. The nation had sinned greatly against the Lord, with their idolatry, injustice, immorality, and insensitivity to his messengers, the prophets (cf Jer 7). But they were still God's people, and he loved them. Though he would chasten them, he would not forsake them.

I'm reminded of the story of the prodigal son, and the folly of youth. It's the story of a young man who decided to spend his inheritance on short-term pleasures, 'living the life' as he saw it. But eventually his decisions caught up with him, he understood the foolishness of his decisions and the harm he had caused, regretted them deeply and longed to return to his father's house. And so he turned his life around and returned to the family home and the father who had never given up on him.

As we read in John's first letter "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:8-9).

God's emphatic pardon is waiting to be gloriously bestowed on all who admit their sin, believe that God is willing and able to forgive us, confesses their brokenness to our loving heavenly Father, and return to his welcoming embrace.

2. Providence (v3-5)

The second P is providence – the provision of God.

The people of Israel had a rough road ahead of them as they returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, but the Lord would go before them to open the way. The picture in verses 3-5 is of an ambassador repairing the roads and removing obstacles, preparing the way for the coming of a king. The image of the highway appears several times in Isaiah's prophecy. Of course, the ultimate fulfilment of these verses is in the ministry of John the Baptist as he prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus (cf Mt 3:1-6). Spiritually speaking, Israel was in the wilderness when Jesus came; but with the arrival of Jesus, so God's glory came (cf Jn 1:14).

God prepares and provides a way for his people to come back to him. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus sends his Spirit on his people to supply all their spiritual needs, and he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and the source of all good things.

3. Promise (v6-8)

Verse 6-8 have at their heart the foundation of faith – the promise of God.

On what can humans depend? Human ingenuity, goodness and strength all ultimately fail: “All people are like grass!” we are reminded by Isaiah. They have their time, but like the flowers of the field, they are gone with the turning of the seasons. Similarly, the mighty empire of the Assyrians was gone, and now Babylon was gone. And other nations and empires have risen and fallen since then. Like the grass, nations and their leaders fulfil their purposes and then fade away. But one thing is permanent and unchanging: the word of our God endures forever. God’s word that created the cosmos out of nothing and brings life out of death, God’s word made flesh in Jesus Christ at Christmas will endure forever. In contrast to the frailty and unreliability of humans and every other power, the promises of God are steadfast and certain. God’s promises recorded in the Bible are the only firm foundation for life.

4. Peace (v9-11)

The final ‘P’ in our section of Isaiah is peace.

The people of God, resting on the pardon, provision and promises of the Lord, are given a picture of peace, or shalom – of good, harmonious living, where all is right. As they journey home, the nation of Israel comes out of the valley and climbs the mountaintop to declare God’s victory over the enemy. The “good news” – or gospel – of verse 9 needs to be shared and celebrated – shouted from the mountain tops! The good news in that day was the defeat of Babylon and the release of the captive Jews (cg 52:7–9). The Good News today is the defeat of sin and Satan by Jesus Christ and the salvation of all who will trust in Him (cf 61:1–3; Lk 4:18–19). The Lord is an undefeated arm wrestler; verse 10 says that God’s arm is a mighty arm for defeating his enemies and ruling his people. But it is also in verse 11 a loving arm for gathering his weary lambs and carrying them close to his heart.

Conclusion

This Advent, amongst the challenge and weariness, we can rest on the pardon, providence, promise and peace of God. During a time of exile, it can feel like there is a long way to go, or it might feel like we are only just around the corner. But the destination, however far off, is certain for those who have put their faith and trust in the Lord, whose word endures forever and who comforts his people. The good news of this Advent tide is that “We are coming home!”