

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD - PEACE

Advent 2 Year B

Is. 40:1-11; Ps. 85:1-2,8-13; 2 Pt. 3:8-5a; MK 1:1-8

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Isaiah chapter 40 begins with those beautiful words: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God...” It also happens to be the opening lines sung in Handel’s Messiah. Comfort is probably something that we all need at this time—in this season that’s supposed to bring us joy and happiness—especially given the year we’ve all had. No doubt there will be many in Australia and around the world that will struggle with that whole concept of joy and happiness as we enter the Christmas season. I have heard it said that there will be many people staying up until midnight on the 31st December—not, so much, to see the new year in, but to make sure the old one leaves. One can only hope that 2021 will be a vast improvement on 2020.

Comfort is what we need when we see the world around us trying to go to hell in a hand basket. Comfort is what we need to help us keep our sanity in a crazy and violent world. Comfort is what we need when we have had to go through lockdowns and restrictions because of a virulent virus. We all need a little Christmas to be interjected into our lives so we can live in a way that will bring us peace.

The people that Isaiah was speaking to in chapter 40 were people who were living in captivity, in Babylonia—people whose ancestors had been taken hostage many years before and they were living there against their will. Some had decided to make the best of a bad situation, had settled down to make Babylonia their home and had intermarried with the Babylonians creating the people who, in the New Testament were called Samaritans. No doubt you’ve all heard of them—people who were often highly disparaged by the Jews in the New Testament. Others, though, had heard the tales of Zion and wept for their homeland—a land that many of them had never seen since they were the children and grandchildren of the original people taken to Babylon. They wanted to be free and to be able to go home to live as they desired.

Prior to Isaiah chapter 40 the news spoken in God’s name was a difficult word of judgment. The people had rebelled against God. They had lived at the expense of their neighbours, putting their own desires above the needs of others. These chapters, mostly from the 8th century BCE, point forward to a time when Jerusalem would be destroyed. In 587 BCE Jerusalem fell to Babylon, and a large portion of Jerusalem’s population went into exile.

From chapter 40 forward, this word of judgment is in the past. Jerusalem was destroyed, and while not all citizens went into exile, a large number of them did. Now, somewhere around 540 BCE, on the other side of this experience, a new word comes to the people of Judah—a word of comfort and hope for a new future.

And so, at long last, the day of liberation came when Cyrus, King of Persia, conquered the Babylonians. When the dust finally settled he told the Jews they could go home. It wasn't so much that he was so kind and benevolent as it was that he didn't want to have to feed and care for a group of foreigners who didn't really belong in the land he now had to manage. So, they were told they could return to their homeland and begin to rebuild it so they could live there.

That's the point of Isaiah 40 where the prophet speaks the word of comfort to his people. They would receive comfort as they began to make their way to the Promised Land once more, a land where their ancestors once had built a Temple to their God Yahweh, a land where they had walls surrounding the city of Jerusalem, a land filled with good things as they planted and watered and harvested their crops. So, Isaiah spoke God's Word to them to tell them that all would be well for them as they made their way to go home.

"Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low..." Even the landscape would change (metaphorically) so that their way would be easier to travel. God would be with them to protect and care for them as a strong warrior and as a shepherd caring for his sheep. They would find comfort in the renewal of their spirits along the waterways of the Jordan as they made their way home.

Those are also the tidings of comfort and joy that we need to hear in the busy and tumultuous world that we are living in today. I'm sure there are many who have been feeling like they've been captives in a foreign land—especially in places like Melbourne and other places around the world where lockdowns have been very severe. We need to hear words of comfort and joy as we work and do what we want and have to do in life amid the noise of the tumult and the cry of the sword from rumours of war on almost a daily basis.

We need to hear words of comfort as we learn of bushfires and floods and cyclones and, of course, viruses that seem as though they can strike at any time, sending us into a spin and leaving us wondering what to do. We need to hear that God is in control and that we do *not* have to worry because our lives belong to God and whatever happens in life God will be there with us and for us.

That promise—the promise of God being in control no matter what happens—comes again to us in the gospel reading for today from Mark , chapter 1, where Mark writes:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

³ *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,’” (Mark 1:1-3)

As I was researching for this sermon, I came across the following story and just had to include it—and it does kind of fit.

In the old Wild West, the story is told, a stranger arriving in town went to the saloon, which he immediately noticed was full of the toughest and meanest looking cowboys he’d ever seen. Tough and fearless himself, he strode in among them, hoisted himself up onto a barstool, and ordered a drink. He had hardly had time to take his first sip, however, when a man burst through the saloon doors, obviously in a panic. “Big Red is coming to town!!” he yelled. “Big Red is coming to town!!” On hearing this, the hard-bitten cowboys in the saloon were instantly terrified and ran screaming out the door.

The stranger thought that was odd, but being genuinely fearless, he remained to finish his drink. About that time, he heard the saloon door swing open again, and turned to see a huge man, 7 feet tall, massively muscled, with long fiery red hair—on his head, on his face, on his chest, on his arms—and the meanest most evil face and eyes he had ever seen. And the stranger, who had never known fear, suddenly was very afraid. The floor of the saloon shook as this massive incarnation of evil walked up to the bar ordered a drink and threw it down his throat. Still shaking with fear, the formerly fearless stranger could think of only one thing: get on the good side of this monster. So he said to him, “Please allow me to buy you another drink.” “Another drink??!!” the fellow said. “I ain’t got time for another drink. Ain’t you heard—Big Red’s coming to town!!!”

Many people thought that John the Baptist was the one who they had been waiting for. They thought that he was the Saviour that God was sending into the world. But time and time again, John told the people that he wasn’t the one. Instead, he said that he came to prepare the way for the Saviour.

John the Baptist, that lonely voice in the wilderness, of which Isaiah spoke, said, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.” More powerful than himself. More powerful than Isaiah. The One who brings peace to a troubled world—Jesus the Christ.

As Mark writes, he wastes no time in getting straight to the point of the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—as proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah from the passage we are looking at today and by John the Baptist. It’s the good news that Jesus is on his way to bring peace and comfort to those in captivity through injustice, sin and shame.

⁶ A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass,

their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;

surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:6-8)

We need to share this good news with others also—the word of God that stands forever. There are many in our neighbourhoods, our cities, our country and indeed around the world, who have no source of comfort in their lives. They feel alone and abandoned by society—unable to make ends meet—troubled by sickness, both mental and physical. We need to let others know that God is on their side and God wants to bring comfort and peace to them even in this time of turmoil and pain.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths. As we continue to move forward into this Advent and Christmas season, know that God goes before you and others to show you the path that is the best one for you. As we face the future—whatever it holds for us—we can do so without fear because knowing *whose* we are is as important as knowing *who* we are. We belong to God and God knows the future, both for us and for all of humanity. The earth is the Lord’s and all that dwell in it. Praise God!

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.