

***“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
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; make
straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough
ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” Isaiah 40: 1 - 5***

Dear Friends,

Perhaps the news of the approval today of the first Covid 19 vaccination for use in Britain by MRHA, brings with it a sense of parallel to the words of the Prophet Isaiah quoted above. It feels like it might bring some comfort at the end of a year that has certainly felt like “hard service!” It prepares the way for a smoother future where some of the rugged terrain that we have had to climb this year, is smoothed out. Certainly, it feels right that there should be some sense of glorying in the amazing accomplishments of the global scientific community who have worked in unprecedented ways to develop a solution to this devastating disease.

Whatever the similarities or interpretations for our time, Isaiah was not speaking into the context of a global pandemic. The context he was addressing was the devastation that had been wrought upon his people by the might of the Babylonian Empire. The Prophet sees that as a consequence of the people turning away from their God. I am not suggesting that our global pandemic is an expression of the judgement of God upon this world. However, it does seem to me that God is working through the consequences of the pandemic to challenge us about how we live out our faith today, about how seriously we take the calling to share our faith with others. And I see signs of hope that we are responding.

The Prophet, here in chapter 40, is speaking words of hope to a people who have lived through times of devastation. And I am struck by the use of the word “*Comfort*.” It has about it that sense of care and compassion, of healing and hope for a different future to those who have been weighed down by so much.

But there are a couple of other ways that we can interpret the Prophet’s use of this word. The Hebrew word that Isaiah uses can also be translated as “*repent*”. Its root has the idea of breathing deeply. It can mean to breathe deeply with sorrow for your

sin, or to breathe deeply as you comfort or console someone else. The idea is that God's comfort comes as a result of the peoples' repentance. Because they have breathed deeply in repentance, God has breathed deeply as he consoles and comforts them. In more New Testament language it could be seen as the conviction that the Holy Spirit works in our lives to humble us and open us up to the renewing and cleansing grace of God. Isaiah had previously said to the people *"in repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength,"* and now, it seems, they were finally ready to receive it. Hard times, times of crisis or loss can do that to us. They can open us up to the goodness and mercy of God like nothing else.

At the end of chapter 40 of Isaiah we find this glorious vision: *"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."*

These are words all about hope, renewal and the strength that God brings to us. It is interesting to note that the English word *"Comfort"* comes from the Latin phrase, *"com fortis,"* which means *"with strength!"* I wonder if the Prophet is suggesting that God's way of bringing comfort is to give strength to face what needs to be faced and do what needs to be done?

Every Blessing,
Rev Tim

Notice

As of today, our church buildings are allowed to re-open for the purpose of corporate worship, subject to the decisions of local church councils. If you are unsure whether your church will be open or if there is a booking system in place please contact your Minister or Senior Church Steward. All churches which will be open for worship will be continuing to follow the guidance to ensure our premises remain covid secure environments.