

## Advent 2 Evensong 6.30pm ... Revd Pippa White

### Isaiah 40: 1 – 11; Luke 1: 1 – 25

#### ***‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God’***

We hear this passage a lot, it’s really familiar isn’t it? Something quite cosy about it. But I’m afraid I’m about to do what I do best, and take the sentimentality out of scripture.

Let’s think about the context, not just for this passage, not just for this chapter of Isaiah, but the context of the whole book of Isaiah.

As anyone who has read the book of Isaiah knows – it’s absolutely huge. It is a long book of the Bible. There’s a whopping 66 chapters to it.

And before we talk about what our little passage from Isaiah means tonight, I want us to have a look at the timeline of everything happening in Isaiah.

**The first chunk of Isaiah** is all about how sinful Israel and Judah is – how not only do they not listen to their God, but they wilfully ignore what God is trying to tell them. They sin, God tells them not to do that, they sin some more, God keeps telling them not to do that, and yet they keep sinning. This is the pattern for a long time.

Then, and perhaps you know what happens next, perhaps you don’t, either’s fine – the exile happens. The exile, if you’ve heard this term used in church but you’ve never really known what anyone’s on about, is what happens when God gets sick of Israel and Judah not listening to him.

This cycle of sin, telling off, sinning some more, has exhausted God. And God finally snaps, and says, you know what? You’re on your own. Israel and Judah, you kept saying that you don’t need me, and you kept acting like you don’t need me, so you know what? I’m not going to be here for you.

So God stops protecting them, and what happens very quickly is that the Babylonians invade, and siege Jerusalem. Babylon then captures most of the residents of Jerusalem, forcing them to go back to Babylon with them – hence, the exile.

And God lets it happen. God says, you kept saying you didn’t need me, so fine, I won’t interfere. Israel and Judah, during this exile, lived under the harsh rule of the Babylonians. They suffered. And God stood back, and watched from afar. Israel and Judah have to learn this lesson the hard way, because they refused to learn any other way. God never abandoned them, because God never abandons people, but God did leave them to learn their lesson, for about 60 years.

That, in a nutshell, is what Isaiah chapters 1 to 39 is all about.

So imagine being the people of Israel and Judah, after 60 years of hardship, and hearing the words ***‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God’***. The relief!

‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God’ – God has come back for us! The hard part is finally done!

The punishment is finally over! That’s why it says, ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins’.

Israel and Judah are finally allowed to get off the naughty step. Their time out in the corner has finished.

Their God has come back to them, and their God is saying ‘come back to me!’! ‘the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together’! Talk about a reunion!

## PTO

***‘lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem... do not fear, say to the cities of Judah ‘Here is your God!’***

It’s such a beautiful moment, isn’t it? Reconciliation, and tenderness, and forgiveness, and atonement (but not that atonement, because Jesus hasn’t been born yet).

And if this were a fairy story, that’s where it would end, isn’t it?

But my friends, if there’s 66 chapters to Isaiah, and we’re only on chapter 40, there’s still some story left, isn’t there?

### **So, what’s the rest of Isaiah?**

Well, for a few chapters, including the rest of chapter 40, we have lots of gushing about how Israel and Judah have their God, and God has his people back – it’s all very happy families, lots of reassurance, lots of love. But that’s only for a few chapters.

Because you know what happens in the rest of Isaiah? God addresses the problems he had with Israel and Judah. Yes, there’s still a lot of chapters saying how glad God is to have his people again, but he also tackles head-on the problems he had with them in the first place.

**In chapter 44**, God talks about how bad idolatry is, and why it’s so offensive to him. Then lots of chapters about God’s promises of love and protection of Israel and Judah, and then in chapters 57 and 58, God talks about why Israel and Judah’s false worship was so offensive to him. And on it goes. Assurance of love, but also not shying away from talking about what the problem was in the first place.

And it’s at this point, that I realise I am preaching to myself just as much to anyone here – because talking about an issue head-on, does not come naturally to me.

Isn’t it so much easier that once you’ve made up with someone, that you just brush the original problem under the carpet? You don’t want to spoil the moment of forgiveness and reconciliation by saying, ‘well, I’m really glad we’re talking again, but actually we’ve not really dealt with the problem that kicked all of this off...’

Just the idea of that makes my toes curl. But! But! It isn’t healthy, is it? It isn’t helpful, is it? It doesn’t actually clear away any of the dead wood and dross that weighs a relationship down – it just pushes it further into a corner where hopefully you don’t see it.

And yet – God refuses to do this. He says ‘yes, Israel and Judah, I love you – you’re back in my good books! But we still need to address those problems that kicked all of this off in the first place’.

**Because here’s the thing – pretending to forget, is not the same as forgiving.** Pretending to forget, is not the same as forgiving. We, as Christians, are called to forgive. We are told to forgive, not just seven times, but seventy times seven.

Because if we come from the God who is endless mercy and patience and forgiveness, and we receive all those things, we should try to show endless mercy and patience and forgiveness to others.

But this needs to be done in healthy ways. Healthy ways where the original problem is actually rooted out and dealt with, in kind and compassionate ways. I’m not saying we all ignore our friends and relatives for 60 years, like God did with the exile, but I am saying we need to have those conversations

which make our toes curl, those conversations God has with Israel and Judah in the last bit of Isaiah, where true reconciliation can happen.

Because it's only out of true reconciliation that true forgiveness can happen. And if we truly forgive, then we share God's love, and bring in his kingdom, one relationship at a time. Amen.