

**"Comfort, my people"** **Isaiah 40**

1. **God's message of Comfort** (1-11)
    - a) **Forgiveness!**
      - *my* people
      - 'double' (sins and land - Isa 61.7, Deut 32.43, Jer 16.18, John 14.1-4)
    - b) **the LORD is coming, to bring home his people!** (3-8)
      - a highway in the desert
      - coming glory (43.25, 45.21-24)
      - A word we can really can rely upon
    - c) **Go tell it on a mountain!** (9-11)
      - Here is your God!
      - a warrior's arm (Exodus 6.6, 14.14; Isa 52.7-53.12)
      - a shepherd's protective tenderness
  2. Yes, but ...
  3. **Reflect, think on God, and think again ...** (12-31)
    - a) Reflect: to whom will you compare God? ...  
Correct your thinking: Do you not know? Lift your eyes!
    - b) Reflect: Why do you say, "God doesn't see, God doesn't care?"  
Correct your thinking: Do you not know? The everlasting God!
- Unsettled?
- c) - Hope! ... (cf 35.8-10)

- Of all the books in the bible, it's the book of Isaiah which has most fed my soul. And my favourite chapter in Isaiah is this one. Because it speaks to me of God. And on my last Sunday with you, I want to speak to you of God.
- The first 39 chapters were addressed to Isaiah's own generation of Israelites, before they went into exile. And the overall message was one of coming **judgment**.
- But chapters 40-55 are addressed to a new generation of Israelites now in exile in **Babylon**, and the tone is different: these are tender words, because the message is no longer one of coming judgment, but of **comfort**. This is God after the anger.

The chapter is in two parts.

1. The first part (which will occupy most of our time) is God's message of **Comfort** - in verses 1-11.
  2. The second part is the rest of the chapter, which asks us question after question about God. And it makes us Stop, to ask who we really believe God is?
- The reason why we're asked this, is to help us deeply believe that the good news (announced in the first part) would will come true, because God - being totally Sovereign - will make it so.
  - But first, the **announcement**.
  - After 39 chapters of judgment, the opening words of chapter 40 comes as immense relief.  
'Comfort, Comfort, my people'.
  - God's obviously speaking about the exiles:  
'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.

- There's tenderness in these words. Here is a message of consolation. Of comfort. And there's three parts.
1. First - there is **forgiveness!** He calls the exiles his people. 'Comfort my people'. The relationship is restored. He has forgiven them.
- Their sins have been paid for.
    - **How** have their sins have been paid for? Obviously something happened to account for God's change of tone. We think: The exile! But could 50, 60, 70 years of exile really atone for more than 1000 years of rebellion?
    - The question - of how atonement is made (and God's anger be turned aside) - is not answered until chapter 53, which we'll get to, but for now, it's enough to announce the reality:
    - There's forgiveness! The relationship is restored! Sin has been paid for!
    - In fact, payment has been made twice over - 'she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins'.
    - 'Double' - because for God to bring his people back to their land to dwell with him, Israel needed atonement not just for their sins, but also for their land which their sin had defiled.

- For us to dwell with God in a new heavens and a new earth, we need not just our sins forgiven, but creation redeemed from sin's curse.
- Christ died not only for our sins, but also as the head of creation.
- So there's massive comfort in the news of forgiveness.

That's the first part of God's message of comfort.

But now we hear other voices:

- Verse 3. 'A voice of one calling'; Verse 5. 'A voice says, "Cry out!"'
- Here are new voices, perhaps from the angelic beings, announcing more parts to God's message of Comfort.
- Verse 3 -

A voice of one calling:

"In the desert prepare  
the way for the LORD;  
make straight in the wilderness  
a highway for our God.

- Now, if we know our bibles, our minds are leaping ahead to the ministry of John the Baptist, who prepared people for Jesus' coming. But before we rush ahead, we need to listen to the detail.
- This voice gives tells us to 'Get ready' because **God himself is coming**.
- And to get ready by building a **highway**.
  - Verse 4 - bring your earth-moving equipment, fill in the valleys, level the mountains, make a highway for our God.
  - Not a helipad. Not a palace. But a road. A wide road. A highway.
  - ... wide enough for a massive movement of people!
- And build it ... in the desert. Desert?
  - and instantly we think of the exodus, and how when God first redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt, he lead them through the desert!

- But now, Israel is in chains again, not in Egypt, but in Babylon. And between Babylon and Jerusalem is a great desert.
  - And to these exiles, far from home, now comes the message that God has forgiven them, and that he is Coming! He is coming through the desert! To redeem them again! To bring them home!
  - Verse 5 says that this is the glory of the LORD. The LORD turning up - in full view of the nations of the world - to bring his people out of captivity, to restore them and bring them home.
  - Isaiah 35 has already spoken of God creating a highway in the desert', on which  
'the redeemed of the Lord will return,  
and come with singing into Zion,  
and everlasting joy will be upon their heads',
  - But adds,  
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped,  
then will lame leap like a deer,  
and the mute tongue (which cannot speak) shout for joy.
  - He says, it will happen  
when God comes to save them!
  - And from Chapter 40 verse 5:  
'this glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
(God forgiving us. God coming, to bring us home to dwell with him.)  
and all peoples will see it.
- [Why?] For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.
- Do you believe it?
  - In **Isaiah's day**, it was hard to believe. Because no people group exiled by another nation in history had ever returned home ever before.

- But it happened. To God's glory!
  - In Isaiah 45, God not only announces this ahead of time, but he names the King who would set the exiles free,  
(and he does this, 70 years before the exile, 100 years before the King is even born) - God names him! Cyrus!
  - And in 538 BC - Cyrus the King of Persia did what no ruler had even done before - he let the exiles go home.
  - The LORD decided it. Planned the method. Announced it ahead of time. It happened. Our Sovereign God! His word comes true!
- But then you say, 'What about the blind receiving their sight, the ears of the deaf being unstopped? Where were the lame walking, the mute people shouting for joy?'
- This part remained unfulfilled.
- And it was a hard word to believe.
- Because none of those medical reversals had ever happened before!
- For 500 years people doubted.
- But then there came a voice! The voice of John the Baptist. Calling. In the desert. Preparing the way of the LORD. Calling people to turn to God - for the LORD was coming!
- And then ... Jesus came.  
And when Jesus came, the eyes of the blind were opened, and the ears of the deaf really were unstopped, the mute tongue DID shout of joy, the lame man did leap - for the first time in history. It had never before.
- When Jesus came, he redeemed people (not from Babylon), but from the physical curse of sin. \*\*
- But had every part of God's promise come true?

What of 'every knee bowing' (in Isaiah 35)?,  
What of 'every tongue confessing' before him?

- When we read God's word of comfort, do we doubt because it just seems ... too fanciful?  
We think of all the generations that have come and gone, and have died with that promise yet to be fulfilled. That length of time can make us ... doubt.
- Because if that's the case, from verse 6 we hear a **new voice** that says. 'Cry out'.
- Isaiah says, 'What shall I cry?'. And the answer:  
"All men are like grass,  
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.  
The grass withers and the flowers fall,  
because the breath of the LORD blows on them.  
Surely the people are grass.
- Here one day, gone the next.
  - In the room behind me, there's a mug shot gallery of all the previous rectors of Holy Trinity, framed there in their glory. Reg Piper. Who remembers Reg? Paul Barnett - anyone remember Paul? Lance Shilton? Graham Delbridge? Reg Fullham? James Farrell? Charles Howard?
  - To most of us, they have no glory. Yet in their time, they shone.
  - You see, our glory ... fades. This is my last Sunday here in the pulpit. (Now, I don't want to be morose. We feel the love. We're so thankful to have been able to serve here. And I know - nothing done for the Lord is ever in vain. But .. My glory will fade. How long it last? 5 years? 10 years?
- We, like flowers ... **fall**.

- But - verse 8 - 'the word of our God **stands** forever'.
  - God's glory (verse 5), is contrasted with ours (verse 8).
  - His glory (verse 5) will be shown to everyone when He comes to take his people home.
  - And if we doubt it (because it sure hasn't happened in our generation - or any one before us!), we'd be wrong to.
  - Because just as the flowers rise and fall in the field, we're no different. Generations will come. Generations will go.
  - But just because we pass, we fade, we fall, it's not the same with God's word. We ... fall. God's word .... **stands**. Forever.
- ➔ Meaning: that when God says He will come and take his people home, we can rely on it.
- And this is God's comfort to us. There is forgiveness! He will come! He will come, to bring his people home! We can trust him!
- 3. And we can rejoice! You know the song, **'Go tell it on a mountain!'** It comes from verse 9.
 

You who bring good tidings to Zion,  
go up on a high mountain.  
You who bring good tidings 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!"

  - Here is the announcement that - after all the waiting - finally the Lord has come!
  - And we're to see **two things about how he's come**.
- 1. First of all  
See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,

and his arm rules for him.

- ➔ Here's another reference to the Exodus, when the LORD redeemed his people 'with mighty power and an outstretched arm'
- the Egyptian army were pursuing the Israelites, and the LORD - who was leading them in a column of fire - told Moses to stand still and see the LORD fight for his people,
- and then the LORD moved in his column of fire to come between the fleeing Israelites and the pursuing Egyptians, and was a rear guard for his people, protecting them, until all the Egyptians perished in the Sea.
- That's the LORD's mighty arm.
- Here, is the LORD's announcement that **he's going to stretch out his arm again**. What's it talking about? It's talking about Jesus, and the cross. Isaiah 52 unpacks it. Verse 7 -  
How beautiful on the mountains  
are the feet of those who bring good news
- It's the same!  
who proclaim peace,  
who bring good tidings,  
who proclaim salvation
- Verse 9 -  
9 Burst into songs of joy together...  
for the LORD has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
- Verse 10 tells us how ...  
10 The LORD will lay bare his holy arm  
in the sight of all the nations,  
and all the ends of the earth will see  
the salvation of our God.

- And alluding to the Exodus, but with a difference:  
12 But you will not leave in haste  
or go in flight;  
for the LORD will go before you,  
the God of Israel will be your rear guard.
- How will God fight for them? How will he be their rear guard?  
13 Behold!, my servant will act wisely;  
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.  
14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him—  
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man
- it's Jesus on the cross, - verse 3 -  
3 ... despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.  
who (in verse 4)  
4 took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
(who, in verse 5)  
5 ...pierced for our transgressions,  
...crushed for our iniquities;  
[whereby]  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.
- It's through Jesus at the cross that God fights for his people, against our guilt and our record of sin and the judgment that condemns us.
- That's the basis on which the LORD can restore us to him. He has to come as a **warrior**.

- So that ... secondly - he can come as a **shepherd**.
- One 'moment' in my time here was back in 2006 at the Carols service at the Town Hall. In a retelling of the parable of the lost sheep, I



came on with a live lamb, which I put on my shoulders. They say you should never work with children or animals. That's never stopped me. (Between ourselves, there was a reason I wore a dark brown shirt, just in case!)

- The back story is that between our Carols concerts, backstage the lamb began to get distressed. All the bottled milk was gone. It was bleating very loudly. It needed comfort. So I took it from its crate, and held it to my chest, for half an hour. The effect was that when we went on, that lamb and I were like this! I was so protective of that lamb.

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- It's because our sin has been dealt with that the LORD can be a shepherd for lost sheep. And there's tenderness the description in Isaiah 40:
 

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.
- This is how the LORD is, and how he will be to us when he comes for us.
  - Today is my last day here as your pastor / shepherd.
  - Now, if this is a hard day, I want you to hear God telling you to trust him, because He is your Shepherd. And He has a protective

- tenderness towards you. And he has tasked his Son, Jesus, the good shepherd (who takes care of his sheep), to care for you.
  - You might think, 'Yes, but you're here. Jesus isn't!'
- If that's your thought, remember Jesus' words of comfort to his disciples just before he was about to go. He said,
 

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me.'

 He said, 'I'm going to prepare a place for you'  
 And he promised them,
 

I will come back, to take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am.'

And Jesus' word of comfort summarises God's word of comfort to us.

1. In Jesus there is forgiveness!
2. Jesus has promised us - he will come to bring us home.
3. This is news to rejoice in! Jesus is our warrior who has fought for us. He is our Shepherd who IS pastoring us. And who told us he'll return to take us home!

That's God's word of comfort.

- But then in **verse 12** (in the second part), the chapter **shifts gear**. Now comes question after question, from God to us, about him. And the effect is to make us stop and think about who we believe that He is?

And He asks this,

- Because God knows us. He knows that we doubt.
- He knows that it's one thing to hear the good news. But that this is the real world. Where God seems small.
- Isaiah's hearers lived in that world. They were in exile. A minority.
  - The record of their sins was always before them.
  - And around them were powerful forces. The Babylonian empire. It's army. It's wealth.

- And then their own sense of insignificance.
- Friends, that's our world"
  - We have past sins which haunt us.
  - Some of us are still paying for those sins.
  - And we're surrounded by powerful forces which drown out God, and make Him seem small, and us - insignificant.
  - Then there's our weaknesses and struggles.
- These can make us doubt God's promise that he's ever coming to restore us.
- Which is why God now poses question after question about who he is, and who we really believe him to be, with the ultimate question in verse 18 - 'To whom will you compare God?'

So, to paraphrase:

- Which idol (which tech company, which multinational, which media mogul), has measured the waters in the hollow of their hand or with the breath of their mouth marked out the heavens?
- Which atheistic philosopher has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weight the mountains on the scales?
- Which panel expert has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counsellor?
- Which educational consultant did the LORD consult to enlighten him?
- Which radio commentator taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?
- When we stop, and think, and reflect, we realise ... no power, no authority is a rival to the LORD.

- And as for the nations, the governments, the armies who strut their stuff and chest puff and intimidate believers, verse 17 - to God, 'they are nothing, worthless, less than nothing'. He's not threatened by them!
- So to whom shall we compare God? An idol? That's laughable. (It has to be nailed down so it won't fall over!). God says Do you not know? ... Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning?
- We do know. We have heard. It has been told.
- But we forget. And so we need to correct our thinking and remember who God is. He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers. He brings princes to naught, and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner do they spring up, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away ...
- So again the Holy One asks, 'To whom then will you compare me? Or who is my equal?'
- He says, 'lift your eyes and look to the heavens!' In May, thousands of Australians did just this as part of ABC's **Stargazing live** program.
- God says, Look at the stars! Who created all these? Who brings them out one by one and calls them each by name?'
- Time after time, when people were interviewed about looking skyward, the answer kept coming back: I realised how **insignificant** I am.
- And we can think that of ourselves, can't we?

- That I'm so insignificant, that God doesn't see, God doesn't care. **Wrong conclusion.**
- When you look at the stars, think:
  - There are at least 100 billion galaxies out there;
  - Our galaxy, the one we can see - the Milky Way - is so vast that it takes light 50 000 years to travel from one side to the other, and it contains 250 billion stars.
  - If each of the galaxies out there was the size of ours, they'd contain 100 billion times 250 billion stars. I don't even know the word for a number that big!
- But here's the thing: God has a name for each one of those stars.
 

'Because of his great power, and his mighty strength, not one of them is missing.'
- The Sovereign Lord of the Universe (to whom we belong) is the God of detail. Verse 27 - So
 

[slow] 'Why do you complain and say,  
"My way is hidden from the LORD;  
my cause is disregarded by my God"?
- Why? Reflect: Why should we think that because my life is fleeing, that we're insignificant to the LORD (who has sovereign knowledge and intimate involvement in all the details of his universe)?
- Why? Is it because we just can't make sense of what he's doing in the world ... or in our lives?
 

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.

- (We won't understand all that God's doing in the world!).
- But the God whom we say we believe in, is across every detail.
- And He has given his firm word of promise that he is coming for us.

He really is. Christ is coming for me. Christ is coming for you.

Narelle and I are enormously thankful to God for the 15 and a half years we've had at Trinity City, and to know you as our brothers and sisters. Parting is had.

But God is our comfort. He will make sure we and you - will make it. That's where this whole message is driving. To have us look to God, because it's He who sustains us. To keep going, Because He is our Hope.

- 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.

To those who hope in the LORD.

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