

*The last word*

Something which I occasionally hear people say about someone like me who has a religious faith goes something like this: 'I am not religious, but I envy you – it must bring you great comfort.' It's an interesting comment. Apart from the implication that I must be a rather weak person who can't face life without a crutch, it suggests that the primary feature of religious faith is comfort. And it suggests that the primary feature of God is the kind of tenderness and compassion that always reaches out to bring comfort. And this gets me thinking: is this really what my faith is about: comfort? And if so, comfort about what? Comfort when life is tough? Comfort in the face of death?

Certainly our reading today sounds a strong note of comfort: it begins with those great words, familiar to us from Handel's *Messiah* if nowhere else, 'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God', and it would be easy to grasp these words, lift them out of context and conclude: 'Ah, here is the heart of religious faith!' That, however, hardly does justice to the passage.

So let's dive in – and to understand this reading it's best to imagine, as the prophet Isaiah did, a scene in the courts of heaven, the dwelling place of the Most High God, the date somewhere around 540 BC. And God is in a meeting, surrounded by the heavenly host who are like God's civil servants. This is a kind of heavenly Gemeente meeting. And God is looking down on the city of Jerusalem and what he sees is deeply distressing. Jerusalem is in ruins: rubble and debris everywhere, the marks of fire and destruction, and what was once the dominant landmark of the city, the great temple, reduced to a heap of ruins. And God is anguished at this sight. God recalls how 50 years or so previously the Babylonians had invaded and crushed Jerusalem and leading citizens had been taken away into captivity in Babylon, and this had been a dark and traumatic time for the nation. But now, it was over! Israel had suffered enough and God's was about to give them a new start. And so God commands his civil servants, the heavenly host, to 'Comfort, comfort my people', to tell them those in exile the good news that they can return from Babylon: they can go home! And immediately one of God's heavenly Gemeente, maybe it's the Clerk of Works and Road Maintenance issues the instruction, 'Right! Make way for the glory of the Lord! Make a road in the wilderness, raise the valleys and lower the hills, make a straight and even path between Babylon and Jerusalem! 'Those in favour?' shouts the secretary of the Council – well, actually that's not in the text because the heavenly host know better than to put divine decrees to the vote.

There then follows, however, one further resolution. They need a messenger to convey this decision of God's. They need some mortal who can be entrusted with the Word of the Lord which unlike the grass and flowers of the field endures forever. Someone needs to go up onto a high mountaintop and proclaim the good news to the exiles in Babylon and to the inhabitants and to the ruins of Jerusalem: 'Here is your God, leading a procession of exiles returning home, gathering them like a shepherd, feeding them, and waiting for stragglers, and carrying the little ones in his arms.' And we know that such a messenger was found, because we have this text from which we have read.

Now, when we consider that entire scenario, we recognise that there is more to our faith than mere comfort. There is, perhaps, a rather uncomfortable side to this passage. We are reminded here of a nation, Israel, who were called by God to a special task: they were called to be God's representatives in the world, to be a light to the nations. And that calling brought with it responsibilities: Israel was to model to the world what life looks like under God's rule. They were called to be faithful to God as God was faithful to them. But the consequences of unfaithfulness were dire. It led to judgement and to the tragedy of defeat and exile. And so before we can talk of God comforting Israel we need to talk of God's fierce love which is like a fire that purifies and purges. God is not just a big cuddly, kindly uncle dispensing comfort wherever he sees pain and suffering. There is more to God than that. God allows Israel to suffer for its sins.

Indeed we see two sides of God in this very passage. In verse 10 we read,  
 'See the Lord comes with might,  
 and his arm rules for him,  
 his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.’

This is God the warrior with the strong arm, the God who rules in majesty and holiness. And faithfulness to this God brings its reward of blessing, but unfaithfulness brings its recompense – it brings tragic consequences. And that is a side of God that we ignore at our peril.

But then, however, in the very next verse, there is pictured the other side of God:

‘He will feed his flock like a shepherd:  
he will gather the lambs in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.’

This is the God who reaches out in tenderness and compassion, the God who comes to us and picks up the pieces of our self-inflicted brokenness and puts us back together again and restores us – the God who speaks words of inexpressible comfort.

Isaiah depicts both sides of God, the fullness of God. And if we focus on only one aspect, be it the God of the strong arm of judgement, or the God whose strong arm cradles the lambs and the stragglers and who gathers them up in tenderness, we create an idol, a God of our own making.

Well, fast forward 550 years or so and we find this God at work once again. God comes to his people who are languishing under another empire: not Babylon this time but Rome. And he has come to them in Jesus in order to restore them and to raise them up, to create a renewed Israel within the shell of the old. And we read of the strange figure of John the Baptist who appears out in the wilderness. And he is announcing to the people of Israel this new thing that God is doing and he is calling them to respond to it. And on his lips are these same words of this prophet. He sees himself as the messenger, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!’ But John is a fiery figure and his message is certainly not comfortable as he calls the people to repent, to catch up with this new initiative of God’s, to set their sails to the wind of God’s spirit that is blowing. And then comes Jesus and he does not simply go about dispensing comfort: he calls people to follow him and he makes no attempt to conceal how hard that call may be and how it may set us at odds with the world. And his message includes a warning that the path that the Israel of his day is set upon is destined to lead to destruction and ruin – exactly as in Isaiah’s days of the exile – and that they need to turn and to embrace his alternative, radical vision of what it means to be God’s people. This is not just comfort. Jesus’ ministry challenges complacency and easy accommodation to the status quo. And yes, of course, his ministry is also one of great comfort and compassion to those who have lost the way, those who have fallen foul of the law, the outcasts and the excluded. These are the stragglers that Jesus the tender shepherd gathers in his arms and leads gently. Both sides of Isaiah’s God are revealed in Jesus. We see displayed in him what has been said of the Gospel message: ‘it comforts the afflicted and it afflicts the comfortable’.

These, you see, are the tensions that we find in the Bible: the tension between judgement and restoration, between exile and home-coming; the tension between holiness and compassion, between challenge and comfort; the tension between repentance and forgiveness, between cross and resurrection - and the people of Israel and those who Jesus addresses are caught in this tension. And if we neglect one side we end up with religion as simply an opiate, as Karl Marx described it, a comfort blanket that never changes anything. But err on the other side and you end up with a faith that is all sin and judgement – and where is grace, and mercy?

There is, however, other thing to be said. This tension in which we live is not an unresolved tension for ultimately one side prevails. What we learn from Isaiah is that judgement is not the last word – restoration is; sin is not the last word, forgiveness is; exile is not the last word, homecoming is; the cross is not the last word, resurrection is. Comfort and hope prevail! The late chief rabbi Johnathan Sacks who died recently,` made an important argued that the gift of ancient Greece to the world was the concept of tragedy, that ultimately the world is fated because tragedy is written into the DNA of the universe. In Greek thought the golden age is in the past and there is no hope of future restoration. That’s a bleak outlook. The contribution of Judaism, however, and Christianity with it, is hope: hope of the new creation where all will be well. Tragedy is real and potent, but it can never have the last word: that belongs to hope.

So where does this leave us this Advent 2020: this advent of pandemic, this advent of isolation and separation for many. Is it a time to consider where we as are being judged – and failing? Is it a time to consider what repentance might mean, as individuals, as a society? Has this pandemic shone a light on where we might change our ways? Let's hope so. But that is not the last word. Christmas comes as a promise that God has not forgotten us. God does not give up on us. God keeps faith with us. God is with us in Jesus, as is here at the Lord's table. Beyond fear there is reassurance and hope, and God's last word is comfort. Amen.