

# Carol Service @Priory Street 2pm Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> December

Book via Norman, David or the office (01249 701078)

ISAIAH 40:1-11    CBC 13.12.2020

This week we're taking a break from the book of Daniel (we'll aim to return to Daniel after the Christmas and New Year break). Let's share together in a great Advent text. ***Please read Isaiah 40:1-11 ...***

If you're a fan of Handel's *Messiah* you'll be familiar with this passage because it provided Handel with four of his greatest pieces. What do you think is the most wonderful thing about these verses? The beauty of the words? The heart-warming truths they reveal? Perhaps the most wonderful thing about these verses is where they come. In the previous chapter, judgment has been pronounced on God's people (Isa 39:5-7), and it's dismaying to see that the king was more concerned with his own quiet life than with the future of God's flock (39:8). Indeed, do they even *have* a future?

And then, in ch.40, Isaiah sees more than a century ahead, beyond his own lifetime. He looks over the horizon, and sees his people in captivity in Babylon. Remember, this is a people that had been chosen by God, rescued from slavery in Egypt, given a land of their own, and told by God how to live so that they flourished. But they ignored God's way of living in His land, and everything went wrong. And now the wheel has gone full circle. They're slaves again. They've lost their homes and possessions; some have lost their loved ones. And they're even losing their faith in God. *"I don't believe God loves me. I don't think He's interested in me. He never answers my prayers. My life is full of trouble, but God doesn't help me"* (40:27).

What would you say to someone who said that? Isa 40-66 tell us what God said. And it's summarised in 40:9, *"Here is your God!"* Get ready to meet Him! These chapters contain a bewilderingly great vision of God. In Isa 40 the focus is on the bigness of God; and it begins in vv.1-11 with the bigness of His HEART.

Isaiah has no sooner pronounced judgement on King Hezekiah's sin (ch.39) than something amazing happens: he's told to organize messengers of comfort. Even more amazing: the comfort message eventually covers all the earth – not just Israel, but the distant islands too (42:1-4). God's response to sin is not just judgement but grace for the whole world. But it begins at home (vv.1-2): *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 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."*

The picture is of God watching His people suffering the consequences of their sins, and He just can't bear to see them suffering any longer. So He does something about it. Their sin has been paid for – though we're not yet told how. That's still to come. We'll learn in ch.53 it's not them who has made the payment for their sins – it's someone else. This is not a cheap presidential pardon that ignores justice. This pardon cost God everything.

But with sin paid for, God is going to take His people in His arms, and nothing is going to stop Him! If ever you're tempted to think you've blown it completely with God – you've messed up so badly that God either won't or can't come to you ever again, then vv.3-4 are for you: *"A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."*

God does not forgive from a distance. He's not like a remote Home Secretary sitting in His office signing a reprieve. He *comes to us*, because His forgiveness is always more than pardon. It means reconciliation. Friendship. And nothing is going to stop Him coming to us. There'll be a highway for our God, no matter how much of a desert we've made of our lives.

vv.3-4 sound like a great text for civil engineers, filling in the potholes before a royal visit to make the road as smooth as possible. But what potholes – the size of valleys! What bumps in the road – the size of mountains! Who can ever level out this ground? Our God can.

Have you seen the film *"Home Alone"*? The mother is determined to get back to her child, and nothing is going to stop her. That's our God! He isn't going to let anything get in the way of Him coming to His children. No matter how deep the valley you've gouged into your life. No matter how high the mountain of rubbish you've piled up. Nothing is going to stop this God rescuing His children.

And He does this, not for their sake alone, but (v.5) so that all mankind will see His glory. This is a missionary note. As the watching world looks on, it will learn what kind of God He is. They'll see His grace!

And that's not all. A second voice continues the revelation (vv.6-8). There's a frailty to human beings: *"all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field"* (v.6) – it doesn't last long. We're faddish, unreliable creatures. And we're vulnerable, withering like grass (vv.7-8), subject to death. But God is different. He's the everlasting God, who won't grow tired or weary (v.28). And as One who never changes, He keeps His promises! v.8: *"The word of our God endures for ever"*, because it doesn't come from the world of decay but from the eternal world. The reason I read the word of God each day is that I want to build my life on something that will last. And I preach it every Sunday because I want YOU to build your life on something that will last. *"The word of our God endures for ever."* So when God says "Your sins are forgiven" - that means *for ever*.

And this is such good news that even more heralds are drawn in to announce it (v.9) – in Zion, on the mountains, in the towns of Judah, tell it everywhere! Here is your God! He has the strength of a ruler (v.10), and with that strength He's worked for a reward that He's set His heart on. And that reward is nothing less than His people, His flock that He tends like a shepherd (v.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."*

Isn't that beautiful? I hope you don't have a problem with being considered as a sheep – it's really a very fitting image for us in our weakness and waywardness. Yet with this Shepherd as *our* Shepherd we are safe. Even the lambs – the weakest and most vulnerable. God doesn't see His people as an undifferentiated mass. He knows we differ in our needs and our capacity. And we each receive the care we need from God to ensure that we make it to the end of the journey and arrive safely home. God will carry us in His arms if necessary (notice that the ruling arm of v.10 becomes a carrying arm in v.11). This is our God. Meekness and majesty! Strong to set the prisoners free; compassionate to heal the broken.

And much more wonder lies ahead, not only in the rest of Isaiah, but beyond that in the remainder of the Bible. But here's a glimpse of the wonder of God. This is what God is towards us as sinners and failures. This is how His plans triumph over our frailties. And it's those who know most deeply that they have strayed who feel most tenderly His mercy, His shepherding arms around them, leading them home.

## CONCLUSION

That was God's answer through Isaiah to people who felt helpless and hopeless. Most Christians have felt like this at some time or another. *"Look at me"*, says the Lord. *"Behold your God!"*

You say, *"How can I behold this God? If only I could see Him! But He's invisible!"* But God has accommodated Himself to our weakness in the most wonderful way. He has made Himself visible, as we remember every Christmas. He took flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). Look to our Lord Jesus Christ – HE is the God of Isa 40. These verses are made visible in Him:

- Jesus is the One who fulfilled vv.1-2 by paying for our sins so that we might know the comfort of being forgiven and reconciled to God.
- It's in Jesus that the glory of the Lord is revealed (v5), for *"God gives us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ"* (2Co 4:6)
- If you want to build your life on the word of God which stands for ever (v.8), cling to Jesus! For Jesus is the eternal Word of God (Jn 1:1), which is why He can say, *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away"* (Mk 13:31).
- Who is the Sovereign Lord (v.10) who rescues His people from their captivity? It's Jesus, who was sent by His Father *"to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and to set the oppressed free"* (Lk 4:18)
- He does it, because He's the Good Shepherd (v.11), who loves His flock enough to die for them, and who carries His sheep in His arms (Jn 10:14-15).

Brother and sisters, God has come in Jesus, and the result is v.5: the glory of God has been revealed. We see in Jesus His worthiness and beauty. *"We beheld His glory,"* writes John (Jn 1:14), as He spoke with authority, healed the sick, tamed the elements, raised the dead, welcomed the poor and the outcast, loved the unwanted, and made sinners His friends.

And His heart towards you hasn't changed. Every time we meet at the Lord's Table He says to us not just *"You're forgiven"*; rather, *"Come to dinner!"* So look to Him and you will behold your God. And you will see that God has not abandoned you. God is FOR you. And at the end of a difficult year, that's real comfort.

**PRAYER:** Gracious God, thank you for coming to us in Jesus. Help us by Your Spirit to receive Your forgiveness; to behold your glory; to rest on Your word; to rely on Your power; and to be comforted by Your care. And then enable us to share Your love with others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION:

- Which of the gracious words of Isa 40:1-11 do you most need to hear right now? Take time to meditate on it, and prayerfully apply it to your need.
- Who can you comfort and encourage this week from this passage?