

ISAIAH 40:1-11
ST JOHN'S, 17.12.17, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

During this season of Advent, we stand at the end of the calendar year, and the beginning of a new church year. As a church family, we meet with great sorrow in our hearts, as we mourn the death of Marlene, our dear friend and sister in Christ. This year, we've also been mourning the deaths of Gerald, Bella Formstone, Megan John and Rose Hodges. And there are others, who are no longer able to come to church, and whose presence we miss. 2017 has been a very sad and difficult year for us . . .

It struck me quite powerfully, as I thought about all this in the days following Marlene's death, that the OT reading which we would have heard last Sunday begins with these words: *"Comfort my people," says our God. "Comfort them!"* (Isaiah 40:1). We desperately need the Lord's comfort today. We miss our friends, and we wonder how our church family will get on without them to strengthen and encourage us.

Of course, our situation is nowhere near as desperate as the situation into which the Lord spoke these words of comfort through Isaiah. But even so, I believe that the Lord is longing to comfort and encourage us now, as he comforted and encouraged his people in exile through Isaiah.

ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE LIKE GRASS

We have been reminded all too strongly this year of the truth of verses 6-7: . . . *all human beings are like grass; they last no longer than wild*

flowers. Grass withers and flowers fade, when the LORD sends the wind blowing over them. People are no more enduring than grass. No one is immortal. We all die. It's right that we're sad when people we love die. We feel as if the stuffing's been knocked out of us, especially when people die unexpectedly. The Lord knows and understands our pain, and he shares it: we know that Jesus himself stood and wept at Lazarus' grave, and we can only assume that he suffered other bereavements which aren't recorded in Scripture.

But our response to the death of those we love cannot be to despair and lose hope. The Lord himself comforts us in our sorrow. *Yes, grass withers and flowers fade, but the word of our God endures for ever* (v 8).

COMFORT MY PEOPLE!

The words of comfort which the Lord offers to us through Isaiah are far from being empty comfort. Firstly, we're assured that we are God's people, *my people* he calls us. The exiles in Babylon were assured that in spite of all they were suffering, the covenant which the Lord made with their ancestors at Sinai was still valid. The Lord assures us that in spite of our grief, in spite of falling numbers attending church, and church activities having to come to an end, the covenant which Jesus made in his own blood still stands. Every time we celebrate Communion, we do it to remember Jesus and to proclaim his death until he comes again. Nothing has changed: we're still the Lord's people, bought by his own blood (Acts 20:28).

Secondly, like the exiles in Babylon, our sins have been forgiven. Through Isaiah, the Lord says, *Tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are now forgiven* (v 2). We know even better than those long-ago exiles that our sins have been forgiven, our penalty has been paid. At the Last Supper, Jesus himself said, *This is my blood . . . which is poured out . . . for the forgiveness of sins* (Matthew 26:28).

Thirdly, the Lord assures us that he will act to show that he has forgiven us. The promise to the exiles in Babylon is that the Lord will bring them home (v 10). *He will take care of his flock like a shepherd* (v 11). Back in chapter 35, we read another expression of the same promise: *give strength to hands that are tired and to knees that tremble with weakness. Tell everyone who is discouraged, "Be strong and don't be afraid! God is coming to your rescue . . ."* (Isaiah 35:3-4). In that passage too, a way is prepared in the wilderness for the Lord and his people. *Those whom the Lord has rescued will travel home by that road* (35:9).

The final truth which the Lord offers in comfort to his people is that they can rely on his word. *Grass withers and flowers fade, but the word of our God endures for ever* (v 8). We're not to rely on other people, but only on God's word. We've lost some precious brothers and sisters, who were key people in the life and witness of this church. But that doesn't mean that the Lord has abandoned us! If we were relying on Marlene, or Gerald, or anyone else, to provide us with strength, or encouragement, or a sense of purpose, then we were putting our faith

in the wrong place. *People are no more enduring than grass . . . but the word of our God endures for ever* (vv 7-8). Relying on God's word means that we're putting our trust in the One who is committed to us and has all the resources he needs to care for us, the One who himself *endures for ever*. There's a similar message in Psalm 103: *As for us, our life is like grass. We grow and flourish like a wild flower; then the wind blows on it, and it is gone – no-one sees it again. But for those who honour the Lord, his love lasts for ever, and his goodness endures for all generations of those who are true to his covenant and who faithfully obey his commands* (Psalm 103:15-18).

PROCLAIM A MESSAGE!

This comfort really is Good News. It's such good news that we can't keep it to ourselves. Instead we must shout it from the mountaintops. There's a voice crying out in vv 3 & 6 of our passage, and the command to *proclaim, call out, announce, speak out, tell* is repeated over and again (vv 6, 9).

In v 6, *A voice cries out, "Proclaim a message!"* A commentator writes:

There is tension in the air, because an urgent call to action has been issued, and so far no-one has responded. Who of us cannot remember being in such a situation on countless occasions? It is the point at which people begin to squirm in their seats and everyone avoids the speaker's eye.¹

At our prayer breakfast in November we sang these words:

We bear the torch that flaming
fell from the hands of those
who gave their lives proclaiming
that Jesus died and rose.
Ours is the same commission,
the same glad message ours,
fired by the same ambition,
to thee we yield our powers.²

We've been incredibly blessed here at St John's to have had the likes of Marlene, Gerald and others as members of our Church family. They were truly faithful servants, who bore the flaming torch, and gave their lives to the task of proclaiming the Good News that Jesus died and rose. They've passed that torch to those of us who are left behind. May we not drop that torch. May we not give up because we feel sorry for ourselves now that our friends have gone to receive their reward in heaven. Instead, may we, as a church family, yield our powers to the Lord, may we be faithful and effective in proclaiming the same glad message. If we give up, we're letting down our friends, who loved this church and spent their own time and energy in building God's kingdom here at St John's.

It's an urgent task. Since I came to St John's, time and again we've found it's impossible to keep our activities going. Very few people now meet regularly for Bible Study and Fellowship compared to the situation

when I came here in 2010. Little People Toddler Church stopped meeting a few years ago, and the Sunday Club became unviable three years ago. Banana Club has really struggled to keep going over the last year and a bit. It didn't meet this term, and I'm not sure that it will open again in January. EMU Club closed on Monday, and it looks unlikely that the Pop In will be able to continue in the New Year.

So we need to come together as a whole church to pray, think and decide what the Lord's saying to us in all this. How do we continue to proclaim the message of God's love for the people in our communities, given our own small numbers, and the fact that many aren't able to be as active as they'd like to be? If you've read your Herald, you'll know that we're planning to do just this in the New Year. I'm calling everyone together for two Saturdays in February and March. If you're concerned about the future of St John's, if you want to make sure we don't drop the flaming torch which has fallen from the hands of those who've gone before us, then make those two days an absolute priority.

Let's not be discouraged. The Lord is still here; his Spirit is still with us. The prophet Elisha asked to inherit a double portion of Elijah's spirit (2 Kings 2), and his request was granted. We have every reason to expect the Lord to send his Spirit, so that we might faithfully continue the ministry which Marlene and our other friends have left in our hands. The Lord plans for the exiles in Babylon were to give them hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). I'm confident that he has the same plans for St John's.

¹ Barry Webb, The Message of Isaiah, (Leicester, IVP, 1996), p 161

² Frank Houghton (1894 – 1972), Facing a task unfinished,