

Sunday 28th June 2020

God's comforting love

Isaiah 40:1-5 & Ephesians 1:3-10

Good Morning and welcome to St John's online morning reflection. I trust you have had a good week. My name is Jonathan and I am normally to be found behind the drum kit. Today we are looking at two passages, one from Isaiah and one from Ephesians, before we do so, Margaret is going to lead us in our prayers for this week.

Prayers

Almighty God our Heavenly Father, we come to you in prayer today mindful of turmoil in our world. You ask us to give thanks and praise in all circumstances, so we count our blessings and thank you for the wonder of creation. Thank you for the blessings of life and health, for family and friends, love and contact, even at a distance and for sustenance and shelter. We just praise and thank you Lord for so much.

In spite of knowing your love and goodness to us, we continually let you down. We confess and repent of sinning against you in thought, word and deed. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you died to take wrong doings away from us and that we are forgiven by God because of you.

O Lord Jesus, as a forgiven people, we now have the hope of eternal life with you because you also rose again, we pray that we will prepare our hearts for you. Please open us up to God's comforting love in all the turmoil and trouble the world experiences at the moment.

Please comfort us who may be feeling isolated, lonely or elderly like Keith and Barbara Rooksby, comfort too those who are grieving the death of loved ones, like Emma Blizzard's and Yvette Evans' families. We pray for healing for those who are ill, especially Val Beckway and Emma's daughter Becky, and Jean Marzetti, a member of Holy Trinity Church, close to our family and seriously ill in Kings Hospital. We thank you Lord that Sarah Murrell's mother is home having no physical or mental injuries and pray that neither parent has picked up the virus from the exposure.

We pray for all to live their lives safely and sensibly to prevent further spread of infection. We pray for the health workers, medical staff and scientists. Give them all energy health and strength to continue their wonderful work. Thank you, Lord, for them. May the development of vaccines be effective to control the virus. O Lord, may your help and hope be with all those in trouble of finance, unemployment and debt. Give wisdom to governments and authorities to help.

Lord God, we pray for your will to be done, for peace for war torn countries. May attitudes be changed from racism to acceptance of all as equals, bringing tolerance, love and peace to people of differing cultures and backgrounds.

O Lord, our heavenly Father, thank you for your family of our church here. Bless our church council with Ian and Steve, our wardens, as they keep the church running. May your Spirit lead them and us to continue faithfully serving you and one another to build our faith and love and care for everyone including the community around us.

To conclude our prayers, the Collect or special prayer for this Sunday:-

Lord, you have taught us that all our doings without love are nothing worth; send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love.. Grant this for your only Son Jesus Christ's sake, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen

Readings

Our first reading today is from Isaiah, chapter 40 verses 1-5

40 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.

³ A voice of one calling:
'In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;^[a]
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.^[b]

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

Our second reading today is from Ephesians, chapter 2 verses 3-10

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he^[b] predestined us for adoption to sonship^[c] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he^[d] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

"It's like in the great stories, Mr Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end, because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad has happened?"

That is a quote from the film version of Lord of the Rings. Frodo and Sam have struggled to travel to Mordor to destroy the Ring of Power. They were in a place where there was no hope...no comfort. How can the end be happy? How can the world go back to the way it was when so much bad has happened?

There is a traditional English Christmas carol, one of the oldest carols, dating back to the 16th century, the name of its author long unknown. In Dickens' A Christmas Carol this song stirred the irritation of Ebenezer Scrooge, causing him to grab up a ruler "with such energy of action that the singer fled in terror".

*God rest ye merry gentlemen, Let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Saviour, Was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's pow'r, When we were gone astray
Oh tidings of comfort and joy, Comfort and joy, Oh tidings of comfort and joy.*

In this time of uncertainty, we seek the comfort and joy that only Christ can bring.

In both our texts God speaks in different tones that I hope will bring us comfort and joy, to know that we are loved by God.

Many islands in the Pacific Ocean appear to be tiny points of land that rise only a few thousand feet above sea level. Yet the foundations of those peaks extend for miles underwater. In fact, if measured from their base, some would tower above the Himalayas.

In a similar way, the salvation that we enjoy today involves far more than our brief experience of it. It extends back through time and even beyond time into eternity, "before the foundation of the world". Indeed, salvation brings so many things into play that Paul wrote a 202-word run-on sentence (in the Greek) stretching across twelve verses in Ephesians as he began to describe it. The exhausting, inspiring picture offers a breathtaking vista for the believer.

God the Father has selected us for His grace and God the Son offered Himself as the sacrifice for sin, paying our penalty and extending forgiveness. This work of God began before the world was formed and has continued throughout history.

It's believed Paul was so excited about what he was writing that he didn't really take a breath, but gave praise and glory to God for what He's done for us.

Have you ever been so excited about something that you just start and you don't even think of taking a breath, because your story is so great. That's the image we have of Paul in this section of scripture. He was so excited about what he was saying, that it was one very long run on sentence.

If we take this passage slowly and really look at what Paul's telling us about our relationship with God, we should be overwhelmed. We should realize how really loved we are.

God has blessed us with the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. If we are willing to claim the blessings God has in store for us. We must have the eyes of our heart, spirit and mind open to the working of the Holy Spirit so we can claim and experience these spiritual blessings. God wants us to experience His blessings. He isn't holding back on us. We're the ones holding out on God, not trusting, not believing, not expecting, not being obedient. So we miss out on the blessings, then we wonder why God isn't blessing us. It's us, not God!

Our blessings are not just here in this place, on this earth, but they are in the heavenly places. That's our future home and a place which should give us great hope and comfort! We know that life may not always be what we want it to be on earth. We will have sickness, death, loss, grief, troubles, sorrow, frustrations, people won't always like us, you can add whatever to that list . . . but you know what, that's okay. It's not fun, but it's okay! It's okay, not that I like it, that I face trials, troubles, loss and more. I don't like it . . .

But we know that one day, hopefully many moons from now, we will have the honour of experiencing the joy of heaven. And we know there will be no problems. There will be no hunger, no thirst, no frustrations, no sorrow, no pain, no death. It will be pure joy and power and glory. At this point we will

realise the total fullness of God's perfect love and will know EVERY spiritual blessing. That's what this God of ours has in store for us.

And that's great news and a great comfort to us.

Now, Paul doesn't stop, he's just getting started. God chose us. He chose you! You were first on His list of people He wanted to redeem, people He wanted to hang out and get to know and have you know Him. When I was at Primary school, people would pick teams for football. We would all line up on a line and two captains would pick their teams. It was actually a very fair way of deciding. But if you were the last to be picked...it was a very lonely and humiliating experience. But – that isn't happening with God. He calls you and wants you for Him. He picks you. Even if you're hiding behind others, God sees you and wants you on His team. There's no better feeling than to be picked first.

And when He chose you, He chose you to be in Him, and He in you. You are His, you are nobody else's but God's. Your identity isn't based on what you've accomplished, it's not based on your home, your job, your education, your wealth, it's based only on your identity in Him. And it gets better! He chose you before you were even a twinkle in your mama's eyes. God chose you before the foundation of the world. Before there was water, you were on God's heart and mind. Before the world was created, God already had your picture on His fridge. We are blessed in Christ.

In Isaiah's, time the people had turned away from their God and as they went their own way they got themselves lost. They sort of hoped that God would reveal himself to them in a new way, guide them out of their mess. But what would the coming of God be like? Would he be angry? Isaiah had warned them that there were severe consequences for disobeying God. But was that the final word? Was it hopeless? Had they sinned so much that God had given up on them and wouldn't care about them anymore? Well, God revealed beautiful things to Isaiah from his heart. Sure, there were warnings about their sins. But God spoke beautiful words of hope through Isaiah as well, words which found their fulfillment when Jesus was born.

How did the passage begin? Comfort my people, says your God. When Jesus did finally come and launch into his ministry, it wasn't always comfortable to be around him. If you were determined to be dishonest, to abuse other people, to cover up your sin, he could be pretty hard on you. He did his best to bring those folks back to their senses.

But for so many people, his ministry brought comfort. For the weak, the lonely, those who were sorry for their sins, the poor, the oppressed, those who were grieving, he brought comfort.

The Hebrew word which our Bible translates properly as the verb, "comfort," comes from a root word with the meaning of "taking a deep breath."

Have you ever had one of those hectic days? People bug you. You are racing against the clock. You get home tense and exhausted. You sit back in your chair, tense for a moment, and then you take a deep breath in and out, and you relax. And finally you're comfortable. We need that so much.

Or you are afraid and someone takes you in their arms and you relax and take those deep breaths? Or you are hurting so badly because a loved one has died. All your emotions are raw and frayed. And someone just listens, they understand, they accept you as ragged as you are. And you can let out the deep breath that you've been holding so tightly.

Let that comfort be your image for what God wants to do for his people. Let that comfort be your image for what God wants to do for you. He comes to hold us so that we can breathe out those deep and painful things. He comes to set us free of our burdens so that we can love and serve others.

God's tender gentle speech is unexpected because for 39 chapters Isaiah has delivered the stern condemnation! Isaiah told King Hezekiah that the days are coming when everything in your palace and all that your fathers have stored up until today will be carried off to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the Lord. 'Some of your descendants—who come from you, whom you father—will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'" (Isaiah 39:6-7) Judah was running quickly into captivity and there was no stopping it. Isaiah's message is that God has a tender message also - he hasn't forsaken them nor forgotten them. He wants them to know that they are forgiven.

In the noise of the world in which we live, we can fail to hear the gentleness of God's voice in our own lives. The world is loudly crashing, spiraling out of control. We can experience loud guilt, failure to measure up. We can find it hard to be genuine in our struggles while everyone else is trying to live it up. Whatever the noise is in your life, take time out to just listen to the gentle voice of God who loves you deeply.

A voice of one calling:
'In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.^[b]
⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

This is the promise of the Lord, that all of the obstacles that Judah would face, he would remove them so that they could see His glory. Glory as God travels his highway in the desert to come to them. Glory as God is eternal and powerful, but any people who stand in his way are like short-lived flowers. Glory as God's word stands forever.

This reminds us of what was said of John the Baptist and how he was clearing a pathway for the Lord Jesus.

It's an outcry against everything that stands in the way of our seeing God's glory. Circumstances of life, people who distract and mislead us, our own hearts that can keep leading us astray! This is an outcry ... prepare the way of the Lord in your heart... this is where Christ dwells.

Let us go back to Frodo and Sam.

"It's like in the great stories, Mr Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end, because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad has happened? "

But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going, because they were holding on to something. That there is some good in this world, and it's worth fighting for.

There may be times when we feel like turning back, when we want to stop and not carry on. But the great comfort we have is in the knowledge that God has chosen each one of us, that he loves us, that Jesus came and died for us and that we have the promise of eternal life. Prepare a way for the Lord and he will dwell with you.

Amen

A final blessing...

May the road rise up to meet you.

May the wind be always at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face;

the rains fall soft upon your fields

and, until we meet again,

may God hold you in the palm of His hand

Amen