## 4th December 2011

## Isaiah 40.1-11; Mark 1.1-8

It’s the most wonderful time of the year. Apparently? Yet all the news is miserable. More in debt than we thought. Less growth than we hoped for. More pay freezes, more tax, more job losses. Stories of hardship. Stories of suicides. It’s not very cheery is it! Where are the words of comfort? Well certainly don’t ask Jeremy Clarkson for any!

Many people dread Christmas for a variety of reasons. A few years ago there was a very frank and poignant article in the URC’s Reform magazine by a minister, David Owen who shared about the loss of his wife. His wife Margaret was rushed into hospital on Christmas Eve 2003, seriously ill. He wrote about it and said: ‘Everything we’d prepared for the festive day was put on hold. It was a Christmas I’ll never forget. After a long stay and six weeks, nursing at home, Margaret died the following March. By Christmas 2004 I’d come through my most terrible time of grief, but only just (I still grieve after nearly five years). My children, grandchildren and I knew that the first Christmas without her would be strange and sad, for we loved her dearly.

Margaret excelled at Christmas decorating. her colourful displays lit up the house, and her cooking skills were fit for royalty. But, more than all she radiated joy. How could we really celebrate with her missing? It was hard on the day, and our tears surfaced, but as we dined and shared the day together, recalling happy times past, we knew she was willing us to carry on cheerfully, and that we managed, as much as a tribute to her as for our own need. Family life prevailed, and with each others’ help we felt stronger for having come through this first and most emotive occasion.

David Owen went on to say that of course, Christmas is a truly happy time for those of us who believe the birth of Jesus was God’s own coming among us. Our carols tell of ‘news of great joy, great mirth’, bidding us not be sad ‘since our redeemer made us glad’. This is an eternal happiness no human sorrow ever eliminates. But David Owen also notes how whilst there was gladness at that first Christmas there was also much sadness, deeply embedded in the politics and religion of the time and people’s fears were palpable. The magi were in great danger, Herod ordered the massacre of the innocents, and Israel was under occupation from a ruthless Roman Empire. Sadness and gladness co-existed. Light needs darkness to shine in.

Our biblical passage speaks a message of hope in the midst of despair and darkness.

*Isaiah 40.vs 1: ‘Comfort my people; bring comfort to them says your God; speak kindly to Jerusalem.’’*

The book of Isaiah contains at least three sections, each speaking in and out of a particular era in Israel’s History. The first 39 chapters, dating from the 8th century BCE, are a series of warnings of coming disaster for the people of Judah. Chapter 40 begins the section of God’s word to the Jews after their kingdom fell in 586 BCE. At that time many people were carried into exile in Babylon, perhaps even the prophet who delivers this message. After years in Babylon, many Hebrew exiles had built homes and established comfortable lives there.

But empires rise and fall and Cyrus of Persia came to threaten Babylon. Cyrus was thought to be more tolerant of the Hebrew exiles. There was hope for a new beginning. In **Isaiah 40:1–11**, the prophet speaks to persuade the exiles to go back to Jerusalem. Cyrus will be God’s instrument in fostering their return. Indeed, Cyrus eventually did provide for rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple.

In this passage, God speaks a message of comfort to the people of Judah and to Jerusalem. Their suffering is coming to an end; they have paid double the penalty for their sins. The exiles hope there will be a way for them to return to the Land of promise. The prophet calls on the leaders of the people to prepare this “way of the Lord,” to make possible the return of God’s people.

How can we find comfort when our world has fallen apart. How can we find comfort when we fell in exile a long way from home – where we want to be? Where will we find comfort?

The prophet is encouraged to comfort the people and speak kindly to the people – so based on this passage here are a few thoughts which I offer to you.

**Firstly look at the mess you are in**

Isaiah starts by reminding the people of God of the mess they got into. Proclaim to her that her term of bondage is served; her penalty is paid, for she has received at the Lord’s hand double measure for all her sins. If we are in a mess – the first thing we need to know is why we are in a mess. You need to know what is wrong with you in order to find the fright sort of comfort. This takes enormous courage and quite a lot of people can’t face it and continue to live in denial that they are in a mess or deny the true cause of the mess they are in.

Broadly speaking we fall in one of two camps: either we think everything is our fault, we are over responsible – or we blame everyone else except ourselves – we are irresponsible we don’t look at what we may have done to bring this mess upon ourselves. There is true guilt and there is false guilt. The mess we are in may be our fault it may be the fault of others, it may be a combination. But can we soberly and objectively face up to the problem. Because if we can’t – whatever comfort we grasp for it won’t hit the right spot.

Isaiah reminds the people of God that they have had plenty of time to come to terms with the mess they got into. But now they are ready to move on.

**Secondly move on**

A voice cries ‘clear a road through the wilderness for the Lord; prepare a highway across the desert for our God. Let every valley be raised, every mountain and hill be brought low, uneven ground be made smooth and steep places become level.

God is creating a new geography, raising valleys and lowering mountains, smoothing the path that leads the exiles back to Jerusalem – back to the heart and centre of their faith.

What obstacles are in the way to finding comfort? What blocks are there to receiving new hope and a new direction? So often we can convince ourselves that no one loves us. No one cares. God doesn’t even care? There is a well known illustration of how a man car has driven off a cliff and he’s left holding onto the branch of the tree and in desperation is calling out for God to rescue him. A helicopter flies above but he refuses their help insisting that the Lord will save him. A mountain rescue team abseil down to him but he refuses their help – because the lord will come to his aid. Then the branch snaps and he falls to his death. Outside the pearly gates he gives St Peter a hard time. Where was God when I needed Him – he let me down! But what about the helicopter and the mountain rescue team said St Peter.

Sometimes we have blocks and obstacles to seeing even the provision God is making for in our need.

Sometimes the blocks and the obstacles to finding a new way forward are anger, bitterness, unforgiveness – all those things can be barriers to moving forward. They will always make a mess of us, more so than the people or things that we are angry or unforgiving towards. That’s why Jesus made forgiveness the biggest factor for spiritual health and well being. Forgive and you’ll be forgiven he said and as we pray each time in the Lord’s Prayer. That’s not to say forget or pretend the hurt doesn’t matter – because it does – but you release the person concerned and give up the right to hurt them back and want revenge. You separate the sin from the sinner – the one who is equally loved by God as you are.

Fear can be another block it can paralyse us and make us rooted to the spot unable to move forward in faith. We may have got used to the mess – it’s too comfortable to up sticks and move on. Some of the exiles in Babylon that Isaiah was addressing had done OK in a foreign land. They may not be free – but they had grown happy with their lot.

Can we clear a road in the wilderness for the Lord? Only then will the glory of the Lord be revealed.

**Thirdly put your hope in God**

Ultimately our help comes from God. We have a way of putting our trust and confidence in anything but God. Ultimately when all else is taken away what are you left with? The suicide of Gary Speed the footballer and welsh manager shocked the sporting work last weekend. Here was someone who had everything that the world desires – good looks, beautiful wife, lovely kids, gorgeous home, money, status, success. Yet it wasn’t enough. What words of comfort could possibly be said to his wife and family and friends. What a tragedy.

Isaiah proclaims: we are all mortal – we last no longer than a wild flower of the field. We are fragile. Life is fragile.

He goes on... the grass may whither, the flower fade, but the word of our God will endure forever.

Ultimately I can’t give you words of comfort. I can only end up giving you platitudes. It is the Word of God that will endure, that saves. I can but point to the one who is our help. The one who is our shepherd. The one who can save. He has the words of eternal life. Do not put your trust in things that will fade away like grass and flowers.

That’s why Isaiah is told to go and shout from a mountain top good news ‘God is here!’

Like a shepherd he will tend his flock and with his arm keep them together; he will carry the lambs in his bosom and lead the ewes to water.

What a beautiful poetical image.

Verses 9-11 answer last week’s question: Where is God? God is here, Isaiah reminds the people. God the shepherd is coming with strength and with tenderness.

Walter Brueggemann says this in his book the prophetic imagination:

*Have you ever been in a situation where because of anger, depression, preoccupation or exhaustion you could not sing? And then you could? What changed things was to be addressed, called by name, cared for, recognised and assured.*

This week has seen the annual World Aids Day. I always remember the people of Kapelebyong in Uganda with whom I spent a few weeks with in the late 1990’s visiting a friend of ours who was working on a Christian relief project there. The church was vibrant and full of hope. About a third of the village were infected with HIV Aids. They always say there is someone worse off than you. That’s not much comfort for the person who is worse off than you. Where do they find comfort?

The people of Kapelebyong lived in mud huts and had nothing by our standards. Yet they had everything. Their hope was in God. Their citizenship was in a heavenly city. Their reward was to come. Their eyes were set not on the mess they were in now but on where God was calling them. The advent prayer ‘Come Lord Jesus Come’ was a prayer they cried from their hearts longing for the new world that is to come. That hope sustained them. The grass whithers the flowers fade but the word of God endures forever.

Hope gets us moving. The shepherd is here. The shepherd wants to lead you to water. Wants to hold you in his arms. We are not alone. We are not unloved.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian and part of the Confessing Church that opposed Hitler’s Nazi Party and paid with his life. Bonhoeffer said ‘we are no longer alone. God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved into us. Therefore we adults can rejoice deeply within our hearts under the Christmas tree, perhaps more than the children are able. We know that God’s goodness will once again draw near.’

Comfort my people, bring comfort to them.

Know the mess you are in and why you need comfort.

Raise the valleys and bring low the mountains – remove the obstacles to finding comfort.

Watch for God – he is here and is at work, like a shepherd tending his flock.

May you know God’s comfort this Christmas time.