

CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST

ADVENT 2

DEC. 6th 2020

The word '**comfort**' is described in many different ways – it can mean cheer, console, ease etc. How, if asked, would we describe what 'comfort' is or does? Comfort can be a bowl of hot soup when we've been working outdoors in the winter. Comfort can be a chocolate biscuit and glass of milk given to a child just home from school. Comfort is something we all receive from friends when a loved-one dies. Comfort can be when we are low in spirit and we listen to a special piece of music.

Comfort was hearing Jesus rebuke the wind when He and the disciples were out in a small boat, in a storm. "When they woke Him from sleep, He rebuked the wind and told the disciples to be of good cheer". They **TOOK COMFORT** in these words.

There are many situations, during our lives, that involve us in both fear and discomfort. These can be personal things like our health. It can, especially at the moment, be the absolute fear of losing a (once assumed) good, safe job. The fear of not being able to pay the rent or the mortgage, and so on. There are, unfortunately, many things in life that can involve us in downright fear and discomfort, bringing with them the realisation that nothing is really, truly, gilt-edged.

There are also situations in the world which worry us. The whole of humankind is in great dread, at the moment, from the Coronavirus Pandemic. There are also political and economic upheavals worldwide. I hardly need to remind you that Jesus said that at the end time there will be pestilences, wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes and other natural disasters just before His Second-Coming. There are so many things beyond our personal power to stop or alter. Small wonder that we need to be comforted.

Paul tells us in **Romans 15:4** that Scripture was given to instruct us "So that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have comfort" (or 'hope' in some translations).

So, let's look this morning at that famous passage from Isaiah, the first few verses of Isaiah Ch.40. Written by the unknown prophet whom we call "Second Isaiah". We believe this because Isaiah of Jerusalem simply could not have lived long enough to write chapters 40 to 55. Indeed, it is believed by scholars that the last few chapters of the book were written by a third Prophet. In any case the whole style and ethos of chapters 40 to 66 are quite different from those written by Isaiah of Jerusalem.

Many songs have been written about the 40th chapter of Isaiah. Handel's Messiah alone quotes these verses four different times. We hear the Messiah starting with "Comfort Ye, My People" and "Every Valley shall be exalted". Later on, we hear "O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings to Zion". Finally, we have the comforting "He Shall Feed His Flock."

The first eleven verses of chapter 40 were written by a poet and prophet united in one person. With tremendous joy he speaks of hope, comfort and joy. The awfulness of the exile is at an end. The morning is dawning, and a great future for Jerusalem (that is, the Jewish people) looms clear and vivid before his eyes, and he asks God to speak tenderly to the people. Yes, all flesh is as grass and will, in due time, fade, but the word of God will stand forever. Deal gently Lord, with Jerusalem, (the people) because they have had a very bad time. And through the enlightened Emperor Cyrus, the Great God has freed them and will deal gently with them. He will indeed comfort, uphold and guide them.

Really great stuff – Second Isaiah at his best. However, not all of Isaiah is bright and cheery as he truly was a poet, writer and prophet for 'all seasons'. For other parts of Isaiah are darker. There are prophecies of judgement throughout this book, and with the nativity of Christ approaching us, we would do well to heed them.

The Lord was displeased with injustice such as the neglect and abuse of the poor. HOW DOES HE SEE US TODAY? He was tired of religious hypocrisy. THIS CAN MAKE US ALL UNEASY. He hated idolatry. HOW DOES HE SEE THE GLITZY, COMMERCIAL SO-CALLED CHRISTMAS OF TODAY'S WORLD? He promised that judgement was coming. Not only were Israel and Judah to be judged, but the surrounding nations as well. The two Isaiahs

prophesied for a long time, and they promised judgement. Some of these judgements took place within the lifetime of the prophets, some after, but before our time. Some will come at the end of time as we know it. BUT COME THEY WILL.

Interspersed among these gloomy judgements are prophecies of salvation, comfort and hope. These are like beacons of light in the darkness. Like lighthouses were to mariners before the invention of radar, or satellite navigation, when all that the navigator had was a compass and his charts. After days at sea their navigational skills were proved correct when a flashing light appeared over the horizon, and the captain then knew exactly where he was.

When we read Isaiah and passages like Matthew 24, a thoughtful person rightly becomes concerned, because Jesus, throughout the Gospels, makes it plain that, for us all, there will be a time of reckoning, a time of punishment. Such ideas are completely out of fashion at the moment. Most people, if they think about the End Time at all, hope that they will just about squeeze into the life everlasting on an understanding nod from Jesus. Don't be too sure about that! By the time we die we have all accumulated a fair load of wrong-doing, things that we look back on and are, if we're honest, pretty ashamed of. Saved by the grace of Christ, yes, of course. But is it not reasonable to expect to have to face some form of reckoning? There are no strings attached – Jesus saved us and promises us life everlasting. But punishment? Dantes Inferno? No, I think not. However, the O.T. argues a final day of the Lord, when the unfaithful will be finally judged, an idea developed by Christ and later enshrined in the creeds. It is absolutely certain that the N.T. envisaged a Second Coming and a great Judgement Day, when the end of history was involved, when 'clock-time' was no more, a visible manifestation of Christ meeting out eternal salvation to the faithful, and destruction to the rebellious.

There is, of course, in this imagery, a wide variety of interpretation, and to some thinkers it all cries out for demythologisation, but we need to take care that we don't throw out the baby with the bathwater once we go down THAT road.

But in the long run we must never lose sight of the fact that the Lord God loves us. So instead of confusion and fear, we must remember the fact that He is compassionate and always willing, indeed WANTING, to show love, forgiveness and mercy. The O.T. is littered with accounts of God's patience, love and forgiveness. The Father proved time and again, by his love and patience to people in times past, that He is the same God who delivered their fathers and is willing and eager to deliver us.

This promise runs throughout Holy Scripture and it is **comforting** and teaches us, DEMANDS OF US, that we have unswerving hope.

AMEN

C.J.F.

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