

Isaiah 40 – Hope for the Hopeless

Bible Study for General Synod 2017 – Tuesday Morning

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The overarching theme for our 4 bible studies this week is hope.

Isaiah 40 takes us to the foundation of hope - *our* hope. Though these words were written to ancient Israel thousands of years ago, they are addressed to us as well. What God said then, to them, he continues to say to us today.

To understand the message of hope for us, we need to remember the hopeless situation of the original audience.

God's people were in exile in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's army had conquered Jerusalem, destroyed God's temple, and taken its leading citizens into captivity. But as bad as that was, that wasn't the worst of it. They knew that the reason why they were in exile because God had handed them over into the hands of their enemies. The exile was God's judgment on their sin – in particular, their immortality and their idolatry.

Isa 40-55 is addressed to that generation, languished in exile in Babylon, who knew they had two – seemingly insurmountable – problems. The presenting problem was their captivity, but the deeper problem was that God had apparently abandoned them because of their sin. Was there any way back – any way back to the Promised Land? Any way back to favour with God?

Isa 40-55 says “Yes, there is a way back”. Broadly speaking, Isa 41-48 answers the captivity problem, and Isa 49-55 addresses the sin problem. Isa 40 is the introduction to the whole; a prelude, like an overture to a symphony. In a tantalising and somewhat elusive way, it hits some of the key notes and themes that will be developed in future chapters – forgiveness, release from captivity, the word of the Lord... to give hope to the hopeless.

The start of Isaiah 40 is structured around a series of instructions to “Cry Out!” – not a sorrowful lament, but a ringing cry; to shout aloud. The same word is repeated in verse 2, verse 3 and verses 6 – marking out three distinct messages:

verses 1-2: cry out about forgiveness of sin,

verses 3-6: cry out about the way of the Lord in the desert

verses 6-8: cry out about the constancy of God's word.

This threefold message is what God's people needed to hear in the hopelessness and despair of exile.

Firstly – verse 2 – that “that she [*Jerusalem*] has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.” This is the same message said 3 ways – that the people are no longer under God's judgment.

The language of “double” echoes Jeremiah In Jer 16:18, the Lord declared “I will repay them double for their iniquity and their sin”, because the people had committed the double sins of idolatry and immortality. They had – quote - “polluted my land with ... their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations”.¹ What Jeremiah 16 prophesied in prospect, and what did in fact happen, Isaiah 40 now declares to be at an end. Their double sins have been repaid

¹ See Jer 7:9-10 – “these abominations” refer to “steal and murder, commit adultery, perjury, burn incense ...”

the double.² Later chapters of Isaiah are going to say more about the means by which the Lord can forgive the sins of his people. The most important message at the outset is that God is no longer holding their sins against them. That their most fundamental problem is resolved.

This first message of hope is a message that God's people desperately need to hear. The Lord commissions messengers³ to comfort his people and speak tenderly to them. The Lord comforts his people with the message that judgment is at an end, because their sins have been done away with.

The second message of hope is in verses 3-5. It is a message about road works in the desert. Unless you are a civil engineer, this may not sound particularly exciting. But if you are in exile in Babylon and between you and your homeland is nothing but desert, this is wonderful news. This promise is further developed in Isa 43, where the Lord says to his people "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;" (43:1) "I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you" (43:5), "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (43:19).

The second message of hope in Isa 40 says to God's people – The Lord hasn't abandoned you. Behold, our God is coming to gather his people, and when he comes he is going to take us with him to our true home.

Imagine for a moment that you are the one of the exiles in Babylon, and you have just heard these two messages of hope, addressing your two most pressing problems – the problem of sin and the problem of captivity. Sure, it sounds wonderful – but is it too good to be true? Is there a real basis for hope, or is it just wishful thinking? The third message, in verses 6-8, addresses this. The basis of hope is not in human strength or human achievement, which withers like grass; like the flower of the field. The basis of hope is – verse 8 – "the word of our God [which] stand[s] forever." It is the Lord himself who announces remission of sin in verses 1-2. How do we know that the new exodus foreshadowed in verses 3-5 will happen? – verse 5, "the mouth of the LORD has spoken." The basis for hope is the trustworthiness of the word of God - the word of our God which stands forever.

If you are one of those exiles in Babylon, you have no objective proof about any of this. There is no cloud of dust on the horizon to prove that the way of the Lord is under construction. There is no deed of release for your sins, no account book with "paid in full" stamped on your page. You have to take it on trust. You have to believe the word of the Lord. The divine comfort only comes to those who believe that the mouth of the Lord has spoken, that their sins are dealt with, that their release and rescue from Babylon is only a matter of time. Your hope depends – utterly – on the trustworthiness of the word of our God.

For those who have heard - and believed – and trusted in – this threefold message of hope, we see their response in verses 9-11. They themselves become heralds of good news. The translation can go either way at this point – either Zion herself is the herald of good news, or Zion is recipient of the good news. I think the latter is the better translation,⁴ though it doesn't make that much difference. Either way, those who know and believe these messages of hope don't keep the good news to themselves. They tell others "Here is your God!"

² Double sin – Jer 16:18; Double destruction – Jer 17:18; Double portion – Isa 61:7; Restore double – Zech 9:12.

³ There is an ambiguity – perhaps deliberate – around the identity of these messengers. The messengers are plural in verse 1-2, the "voice" in verse 3 is singular, as is one who asks in v.6, "what shall I cry?", and a feminine singular messenger speaking in vv.9-10 - Is this Zion, or someone speaking to Zion (see the two translation alternatives). The effect of this ambiguity is to direct our attention away from the messengers to the message itself, and the ultimate source of the message of glad tidings (i.e., The Lord).

⁴ On the basis of Isa 41:27 and Isa 52:7.

This God is a beautiful mix of strength and tenderness – the same mighty arm that triumphs and rules is the arm that also “gathers the lambs ... and carry them in his bosom”. Those who know that the Lord is their shepherd tell others about the good shepherd.

In the first instance, this was a message to exiles in Babylon in the sixth century BC. In due course, God’s word came true. Cyrus liberated the exiles and they returned and rebuilt Jerusalem. But that it is not the end of the story. I said at the outset that this passage is a message for us now, not just a message for them, back then.

What the people of God experienced in the sixth century BC was only a partial fulfilment of Isa 40 - a foretaste – of an even greater deliverance yet to come.

The three synoptic gospels apply the start of Isaiah 40 to the ministry of John the Baptist, in as much that he came to “Prepare the way for the Lord”. The Lord – that is, the Lord Jesus, came. He commenced his public ministry by quoting Isaiah – “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” (Luke 4:18-19, citing Isa 61). The Lord came to bring forgiveness of sin and release for the captives.

We who live on this side of the death and resurrection of Jesus now understand how Jesus does this for us – dying for our sin, rising to give us new life by the spirit that releases us from captivity. In one sense, we might be tempted to think that we are not like the first hearers of Isaiah 40, because they were still waiting for God’s great act of salvation, whereas we have come after it.

But there is another sense in which we are in exactly the same situation. There is a now and a not yet to our salvation in Jesus. That day promised on Isa 40:11, when the Lord our shepherd will gather the lambs in his arms, has not yet arrived. Revelation 7 reminds us that we still wait for the day when “Lamb at the centre of the throne will be [our] shepherd, who will lead [us] to springs of the water of life, and ... wipe away every tear from [our] eyes.” (Rev 7:17)

It turns out that we are just like them - living in hope. A hope grounded on the promises of God, to forgive our sins and deliver us from our captivity. A hope grounded on the knowledge that the Lord is the good shepherd who longs to bring the strays home.

Like them, we live in that window of time between the promise and fulfilment. One way of describing our situation would be to say that we have nothing more than the promises of God to cling to. Except that I’m sure Isaiah would not have put it that way. Not that “we have nothing **more** than God’s word”... but that “We have nothing **less** than God’s word”. *The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.*

As we think about the situation of our church nationally over the coming week, it is easy to focus on the negatives: Institutional failures to protect children, struggling or non-viable dioceses, fractured relationships, declining church attendance, declining relevance in society. It can all seem hopeless. Isaiah 40 challenges us to refocus. To look not at our circumstances, but to lift up our eyes and “Behold our God”. To know and come to and cling to the Lord our shepherd, who is mighty to save and tender to comfort. Isaiah 40 gives hope to the hopeless, who put their trust in “the word of our God [which stands] forever”.

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NSRV)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings;^[a]

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,^[b]

lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”

¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

a. Or *O herald of good tidings to Zion*

b. Or *O herald of good tidings to Jerusalem*

STUDY 1: ISAIAH 40:1-11 - QUESTIONS

- As you heard the Bible read and spoken about this morning, what most surprised you?

- Why does Jerusalem need to hear a ‘tender’ word from God at this point in time? (vv.1-2) What is the message of ‘comfort’ that the (unnamed) messengers are to proclaim?

- What is the ‘way/highway’ in the wilderness for? (vv.3-5)
Why is Isa 40:3 quoted at the outset of Jesus’ ministry (Mark 1:3, Matt 3:3, Luke 3:4)?
How do we ‘prepare the way of the Lord’?

- On what does the people’s hope depend? What cannot be depended on? (vv.6-8)
What implications does this have for our hopes?

- What is the message of good tidings? (vv.9-11)
What does the juxtaposition of v.10 and v.11 tell us about the Lord?

- In what sense have we (as Christians) already received what Isaiah 40 promises?
In what sense are we still waiting?

- What is Isaiah 40’s word of comfort to us?

- How does Isaiah 40 give us hope?