

Sunday, 7th June 2015

Isaiah 40:1-11 – The King's Gospel

Introduction

Our reading today is the 6th in our sermon series from Isaiah that seeks to unpack the message 'God is King'. And today we reach chapter 40. In the 39 chapters so far God's prophet Isaiah has been bringing a message of judgement for sin to the people of God. His warnings were intended to purify the people by helping them understand God's true nature and message. However they've ignored the repeated warnings Isaiah brought. So now God has allowed the empire of Babylon to sweep away everything before them and the children of Israel and Judah are now captives in Babylon. They have lost everything. The Lord they complain has abandoned them. One question loomed large for these exiles. Since they had clearly failed to be God's people, did they have a future? Would God again work in their midst, or had He simply rejected them? *Could* God act?

In this crisis of faith, God again speaks to His people through His prophet Isaiah beginning in our passage today. It's a message that shifts to concentrate on God's deliverance and the re-establishment of His people in Jerusalem following the exile. It's also a passage that helps us as Christians today with a wonderful revelation of who God really is. It's a prophecy that's encouraged the readers of every generation to obedience in the present and it offers a sure and certain hope for the future.

First and foremost these 11 verses are a message of comfort. Today my view of comfort is sitting on the sofa, in front of the tele with the misses and hopefully a nice cup of hot chocolate – it's all a little self-indulgent. But the bible's meaning is not that at all. Comfort in this biblical context is about 'breathing new life into' ...its about 'pouring strength into' those who are weak and failing. God's people are exiled in Babylon and it's in that context we hear Isaiah proclaim God's message: 'Comfort my people' – this is about bringing these people back into the centre of God's purposes and God's Will. Also notice how it says 'comfort' twice... 'Comfort, comfort my people'. This simple reflects intensity and urgency – Isaiah is saying God is willing to do this for you. In fact – God is going to do this! It's a promise...that beyond the time of exile there is going to be a new start, beyond His judgement of allowing Babylon to overrun His people there will be the experience of God's mercy.

Basically Isaiah's saying God's purposes of grace and mercy will triumph. Yes – they face a judgement on their rebellion against God but through that judgement will come a great salvation. In the first two verses we can see the good news - judgement is over, a hard service has been completed and the sin has been paid for.

However, the passage also says the people have received double for all their sins. Now as you read that you may think that's not justice is it? Isn't that saying God's been vindictive? If they've received double for all their sins surely that isn't the mark of a God of justice. So what's going on? Isaiah was talking about a 'double-it'. Let me try to explain. If you take a sheet of A4 paper and you fold it together you have a double piece of paper. And one side of the paper matches the other side of the paper exactly in terms of its dimension. It is a double of the other. Isaiah is saying there is an exact match, there is a punishment which

God's people have undergone that fits the crime and now in verse 2 it's all been done! To put this into our context as New Testament Christians – when Jesus gave Himself on the cross in our place – He is the **exact** match for the sins of the whole world.

This passage shows God wants His people to understand His 'comforting' grace as they look to the future. It's an assurance we also need to embrace and make our own as we move forward facing all sorts of uncertainties within our own lives. Nobody can tell what is going to happen in the future except the God who guides and controls and rules that future.

So to help reassure us let's dig deeper into this reading and encounter three permanent characteristics of God we can always rely on whatever our circumstances. You can always be sure that...

1. God will reveal His Glory (v3-5)
2. God will keep His Word (v6-8)
3. God will shepherd His flock (v9-11)

1. You can always be sure that God will reveal His Glory

Take a look at v3&4: 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.

So what's going on here? Well in modern day terms God is going to do some pretty impressive road works and driving a massive motorway through the desert. This is a picture of God coming back from Babylon to Jerusalem with His people. We've heard that God's people have been invaded, captured and exiled to Babylon. But that's not the end of the story as far as God is concerned. He is going to bring His people home. And the voice in the desert is saying nothing will stop Him doing it. When God purposes to move and to build his motorway across the desert so his people can come back from Babylon to Jerusalem no human being, nothing in the created order can stand in the way of him accomplishing it. (v5) And the fact that He will do that is a revelation of the 'glory of the Lord - which all mankind together will see'. One thing you can be sure of God is that He is constantly revealing His glory. He is constantly acting in accordance with His character.

So to top and tail this short section in verses 3 to 5... it begins with a human voice – calling in the desert to prepare the way and it ends in V5 with the mouth of the Lord speaking. The language here is reminiscent of the exodus from Egypt – God is coming to deliver His people. The end of the exile to Babylon will happen and this will herald a second exodus, a new work of God and an even greater deliverance than they have ever seen.

But when historically did this happen? We know that Sirus the Mede conquered the Babylonians around 536 BC and he issued an edict that allowed all the people who had been taken captive to return to their land. But this was only a very partial, physical fulfilment. The spiritual exile only really ended and the new revelation of the glory of God that all mankind could see....that began when the voice of John the Baptist was heard in the wilderness 'Preparing the way of the Lord' as he preached the gospel of repentance. And it was when Jesus came on the scene and was baptised by John that the voice from heaven affirmed 'this is my Son whom I love, with Him I am well pleased'. And later John the apostle would say:

‘We have seen His glory – the glory of the only begotten Son of the Father full of grace and truth’.

Remember all scripture ultimately points to Jesus. As New Testament believers we are therefore the inheritors of these promises of God. We are the recipients of Isaiah’s ‘comfort’ through the gospel of Christ – and we see the grace and the glory of God revealed in Jesus. And all around the world today His people worship Him. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken – and God couldn’t speak to us more completely and more satisfyingly than he has done in the word made flesh.

So as we live in a 21st Century world as believers in the Lord Jesus we know that...the glory that was revealed on the cross when He died there for our sins and in the resurrection as He rose again for our justification and in His ascension into heaven where He reigns at the right hand of God....all of that glory will find its future focus in His coming again in power and authority.

You see the great thing about having the Bible is that we can read it to the end and discover – we win, we get the gold medal! God will come, He will reveal His glory. Indeed He is constantly revealing His glory in His world (as history shows us). So let me ask.... “Are you someone who sees the cup half empty or half full”? Because as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus the true answer should surely be... I am someone whose “cup overflows” because God is constantly revealing His glory.

So let’s move on to our second point...

2. You can always be sure God will keep His Word (v.6-8)

As we briefly look at v.6-8 notice there is a link between these verses and what we’ve just looked at. In V5 we see the phrase ‘**all mankind**’ – and we see it again in V6 where it says...‘**All men** are like grass...’ – we all need to see God’s glory more clearly because we are all like grass. We are no more permanent than the flowers of the field. You see ‘death’ is the ultimate statistic – it is a 100% certainty – we all die. Human glory is nothing alongside God. God is constantly keeping His promises and there is only one eternal source of power and that is God Himself.

It is all too easy to forget that God governs our life in this world. Even the strongest and most effective individuals are just like grass or the flowers of the field that wither and fail because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Now look at the connection in v7 between the breath of the Lord and then the word of God in V8. The word of God stands forever and therefore the people of God have solid ground on which to stand – why...because faith comes by hearing the word of God. There is no plan B – nothing will take its place (though many things will try to). Therefore our bible reading habits are crucial – it really matters. Our spiritual well-being withers if we are not spending time on the Word of God. Because the Word of God endures forever.

What in the papers today will be the chip wrappings tomorrow. But here we are 2,800 years later looking at Isaiah and discovering that this is truth, that this is solid foundation. God’s word is what we need to build our lives on. And if we’re listening more to the voices around us than to the word of God then of course we’ll won’t be strong, of course we’ll be wobbling, of course we’ll be anxious and fearful.

God will keep His word. That's why we need to give ourselves to studying it and reading it in our groups and in our homes and our times of personal devotion. The word of our God stands forever. God will keep His word.

The third thing we need to know to strengthen us and to encourage us, to keep us going, to keep us trusting and obeying, to keep us looking at things with God's eye and with His perspective is that God will shepherd His flock.

3. You can be sure that God will shepherd His flock.

Take a look at V9 and imagine a great buzz of excitement. (CLICK) "You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout..." What's the shout? "Here is your God!"

Imagine God coming back from Babylon to Jerusalem bringing His people with Him – from the exile back to His land. And from hilltop to hilltop the watchman see the great procession on its way back from Babylon, the Lord's coming home to Jerusalem. His bringing His people with Him. And what's the message. "Here is your God"! The God who is both sovereign (as we read in v10) and Shepherd (as we read in V11). What a great encouragement for us today. Because these two qualities that are totally interlinked in God are revealed in Jesus.

V10 speaks about His sovereign rule as King – it's all about ultimate power as we read "His arm rules for Him" in V10. He comes as it were with His sleeves rolled up, He means business. He is coming to rule and to exercise His sovereign Will and to complete His purposes in this world. He brings His liberated people with him as the fruit of His victory. The power of God remakes the people of God. But at the same time 'the arm that rules' also 'gathers the lambs' (as we see in v11). God protects His people.

The picture is one of detailed care – He tends His flock like a shepherd. He knows His sheep, each one individually, and by name. And this arm that rules and governs also gathers the little ones, the lambs. 'He carries them close to His heart' (v.11). 'He gently leads those who have young'. He cares about His people collectively and as individuals. He applies His care in detail to the needs of His people. The image emerging is of the good shepherd who lay down His life for the sheep.

God is sovereign but He's also the Shepherd who gives Himself up for us all. He is that committed to us. Now that is our comfort.

God is our strength - that is where our life comes from. The glory of God revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God who is the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilling all God's promises and purposes and the shepherd King who governs the flock, who cares for His people, who protects us and who shapes His care to the need of the individual. **Here is your God.** And so says Isaiah – trust him, this is who He is, this is what He will do for you.

Conclusion

And so as we conclude where does that lead us in our individual lives and as a congregation of God's people. And the answer is - not someone who sees the cup half empty or even half full. But someone who says "my cup overflows". Someone who says "I am totally dependent on God". It doesn't mean we're inactive or we're impassive, it's not "let go and let God". No...it challenges us as to where our confidence lies.

Faith is saying 'yes' this is God – this is what's His like, this is who He is. The God of Glory, the God of promises that cannot be broken, the God of shepherd care and sovereign authority. And the word of our God will stand forever.

So...as we close remember this... Isaiah 40:1-11 is great news – because it is like a forerunner of the New Testament gospel. Just as John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus himself. When John the Baptist hit the scene the gospel writers described it as the fulfilment of Isaiah 40:3, "A voice cries out: In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord; make straight...a highway". Isaiah's words hadn't lain dormant until that point, but with the coming of Jesus they sprang to life again with deeper and fuller meaning. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of Isaiah 40 transported into a new, higher key. And it too, is far too important to be contained. It must be shouted from hilltop to hilltop for all the world to hear.