

Comfort my People ...

... People of Peace and Restoration

A sermon given on the 2nd Sunday of Advent, 6th December 2020, by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in the Online Communion Service.

Isaiah 40:1-11

"Comfort, O comfort my people" says your God.

Would you like apple crumble or custard or shepherd's pie; perhaps mashed potato or cheese on toast? I wonder what's your preferred comfort food for days like these, when it's cold and wet and dark most of the time? When I asked this question on Facebook earlier this week, 75 people replied very quickly - I think it's that time of year - several bonded over their love of fish pie or their need for cheese - a lot of cheese. I decided that my comfort food would be tomato soup and bread, and on reflection, I realised that this probably stemmed back to the fact that when I was a child, I used to have quite a lot of illness that affected my throat: tonsillitis every year; bronchitis; asthma; bronchitis; the list goes on. And whilst fortunately I have very few memories of being ill, I think the comfort of soup when I couldn't eat very much has remained deep within my being.

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I wonder if I was planning on making apple crumble or vats of steaming hot soup for the Israelites. You see, the word comfort can be used in lots of ways and circumstances. Comfort food is perhaps the easiest to think of because it's instant - that's assuming there's somebody else to make it for you; it's distracting; and as with my soup, it often takes our minds to previous times of help and healing. Other images of comfort may include a duvet in front of a roaring fire, a fluffy pet to stroke while somebody wipes away our tears, or a sympathetic adult sticking a plaster on a grazed knee, places of peace and restoration. We've all seen incredible acts of comfort over the past year during this pandemic: people have reached out to their neighbours in acts of kindness, shopping, phoning, clapping and using online communication in ways we never dreamt of. I imagine if we're honest, the comfort that most of us would like at this particular time is a hug from somebody we've not seen or touched since before March or even earlier, especially for those of us who live alone. It's been a very long year, a tough year for all, an agonisingly painful one for many. We've perhaps been comforted this week by the news that a vaccine is on its way and there are glimmers of hope that the relentless restrictions and struggles

may ease. Scientists have spent their lives working and studying in ways that enable them to find the vaccine so quickly - their dedication and sacrifice for our eventual comfort. Which perhaps brings us a little closer to the kind of comfort spoken of by the prophet Isaiah.

"Comfort, O comfort my people" says your God.

You see, Isaiah isn't talking about soup or hugs, but this is one of many passages where God's prophets remind people who they are and what is the comfort that reaches their deepest needs and truly heals their broken lives and relationships. A comfort that comes with cost and sacrifice. God's prophets are men and women who are prepared to speak difficult truths into their present reality, truths that echo down history, continuing to point to the ultimate comfort: God's love made flesh in Jesus, the place of peace and restoration.

This year has reminded us all of the importance of human connection, the power of touch and hug, shared meals and laughter and human fellowship. I'm not sure if it's insensitive or not to remind you that this time last year, we welcomed 7,000 people through these very doors, all delighting at our Christmas tree festival, a real glimpse of life in its fullness. But we, of course, have all become far more aware of the power of our connections to harm, to spread an invisible virus. Our masks and social distancing, our relentless hand washing and sanitising, even our lockdowns have all been attempts to halt that sickness that spreads so easily. The connections we value at our core need protecting.

The prophets call God's people time and again to a similar journey of cleansing and distancing. The comfort of true repentance, 'metanoia', turning around and walking away from the pollution of the world; the power struggles; the control of others; ignoring of the poor; the abuse of the vulnerable; the pursuit of ideas. To turn around and go on a journey that leads to the place of peace and restoration.

'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.'

The prophets speak to the deepest places of human need, the places that cry out for comfort. They don't offer short term comforts that distract without cost. They speak of the past, to the present, and into the future. Their words inhabit eternity.

'A voice cries out: "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." '

Isaiah writing hundreds of years before John the Baptist became the voice crying in the wilderness; his words a challenge to hearers in his time and a signpost to the future: John the Baptist in the water, in the desert; echoes of the past: the parting of the Red Sea; the Exodus; the 40 years in the wilderness; and yet speaking to the present and into an eternal future that was very, very near. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

During Advent, we intentionally wait in that prophetic space between past, present and future; a liminal, eternal space where we hear again the voice of the prophets, "Comfort, O comfort my people" says your God. And perhaps this year, more than ever, we inhabit that space more fully. We 'double-wait' for the end of this terrible year and the hope of future change, alongside the countdown to the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, the fulfilment of the prophecies, the person of peace and restoration.

In our waiting, may we hear again the call of the prophets to a true repentance, a 'metanoia' of our hearts as we commit ourselves afresh to the comfort and care of God. As we share in the ultimate comfort food this morning, the bread and the wine, the body and the blood of the risen Lord Jesus, let our souls be wrapped in the truth of his promises. And let us live as people of peace and restoration in the world.

"Comfort, O comfort my people" says your God.

Reading Text

Isaiah 40:1-11

¹ 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; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, 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.