

Comfort my people, says your God

(1) Poor old Comfort has been having a pretty hard time since Finn's death!

Those of you who are regular watchers of Casualty on Saturday evenings will know we're talking about Comfort, the paramedic, whose husband, Finn, was tragically killed by a man who couldn't cope with the grief of his wife's death – and then, on top of all that, Comfort discovers disturbing complications in Finn's background that she had known nothing about – so if anyone needs comfort, it is Comfort!

Now, I don't think I have ever heard of anyone else called Comfort – I know people whose names reflect other lovely Bible words, like Faith and Grace and Joy – but never a Comfort – yrt it is a name that reflects one of the lovely themes of real Christian faith.

And '**Comfort**' is the great theme of today's section of 'Isaiah, the Christmas Prophet' – Isaiah 40:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

The people of Isaiah's day desperately needed this message of comfort and hope - these weren't great days for them, as we've seen on previous Sundays - and Isaiah could see, sadly, that they were going to need it even more in the days ahead. Immediately prior to this chapter, Isaiah has warned that things might get worse before they got better: ch.39:6

The time will come when everything ... will be carried off to Babylon ... and some of your own descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you will be taken away ...

But whatever happens, whatever you have to face, says Isaiah, here is God's bottom line, his fundamental word for you; his promise for you to hold unto: *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

God will come with comfort, and God will be your sure hope.

Now this would also be a great message for us, in itself – it's good for us to hold unto God's promises of comfort and hope, for there are many times when we need them.

However Isaiah's words take on even greater significance and importance when we remember that these words from Isaiah, became very much part of the Christmas chapters that explain the birth of Jesus Christ. Here's where we begin to see that Isaiah really was 'the Christmas Prophet'. These very words in Isaiah 40, dating back 700 years before Christ, are used in the Gospels to refer to John, the cousin of Jesus, who we read about being born a few months before the birth of Jesus himself. This cousin became known as 'John the Baptist', the man whose preaching prepared the way for Jesus. As the gospel writers thought about John's life and ministry, they realised that Isaiah ch.40 was being fulfilled: *John went into all the country around the Jordan As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah, the prophet; a voice of one calling in the desert: Prepare the way for the Lord.*

So the Bible shows us that Isaiah 40 really came into its own with John the Baptist, and the coming of Jesus himself. Therefore as we read this great chapter in Isaiah about Comfort, we need to be thinking about it in 3 ways:

- we have to look for what Isaiah said to the people in his day.
 - we have to look for how that really came about in Jesus' day.
 - we have to think about what this all means for us in our day.
- 3 main themes seem to run through what Isaiah said then, and what he continues to say to us today.

1. Much Needed Comfort and Hope. (2)

Isaiah told the people that even though their lives were difficult and the days were looking increasingly dark, God was, and always would be, the God of their comfort and hope, and they could still put their trust in him. He was their God and they were his people, no matter what: *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ...*

He was their God and they were his people:

- even though their frail, human lives were impermanent

and uncertain, like grass that withers and flowers that fall – *but the word of our God stands for ever.* (vs.6-8)

- even though it looked very much as if their land would be completely over-run by powerful, hostile neighbours, *the sovereign Lord is coming with power and his arm rules for him.* (vs.10)

- *even though youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.* (vs.29-31)

This was a much needed message of comfort and hope for people in Isaiah's day – and it surely isn't very different for us today;

– there are so many ways in which life can be difficult, worrying, frightening, and completely uncertain.

– so many times when we feel at the mercy of circumstances, happenings and possibilities that are quite beyond our control.

Whether it is our own lives or the wider life of our family and friends, we all need comfort and hope – and most of us want to believe that this much needed comfort and hope comes from God – but often, deep down, we don't cope all that well with the hard aspects of life – and, if we are honest, we have to admit that we don't always know if trusting in God makes much difference.

Comfort my people, God tells Isaiah – tell them again, and tell them that, for sure, that I am their God, and, for always, I am totally committed to them as my people.

And this is the solid significance of Christmas - that God sent his comfort and hope into the often dark and difficult world of men and women like us, through the birth of Jesus Christ – that because Jesus Christ came, the *good news of great joy that will be for all the people* is that God is our solid comfort and our sure hope.

Through Jesus Christ, we may know that God is there, and that he is there for us. He is our God and we are his people.

a) He is the God who is there for us in comfort and hope, **for our struggling lives (2a)** – when we feel that life is just too hard to cope with - an all too common experience at one time or another.

But, says God through Isaiah, and then in an even greater way

through Jesus, I am the God who *tends his flock like a shepherd, gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart, gently leads those that have young*. Isn't that the God who came to us in Jesus – the good shepherd who knows his sheep, and who is willing to lay down his life to protect them.

b) He is the God who is there for us, in comfort and hope, **for our sinful lives (2b)** – tell my people that *her sin has been paid for ...*. The people of Isaiah's day had brought many of their problems upon themselves – for they had disobeyed the good ways of godly living and in ways, they had near enough deserted the godly faith in which they had been brought up. So, little wonder that their lives were discouraging and the days were difficult. And yet, Isaiah is able to come to them with this message of comfort and hope, that God had not abandoned them or disowned them, or withdrawn his promise to be their God – far from it, *tell them that their sin has been paid for* – God is a God of comfort and hope, even for sinful lives; even for the most sinful lives.

What a message that is, for if we are honest with ourselves, we have to recognise that our lives sometimes squeeze God out of his rightful place, sometimes twist others into the place that suits us, and that, maybe worst of all, easily make excuses for ourselves. Sometimes we proceed on the basis of hoping that God will overlook this reality, but how much better to know that God is a God who deals properly and completely with our sinful lives – and who gives real forgiveness and hope.

And isn't that the message that came from God with Jesus – *today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you ...you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins* – and the rest of Jesus' life, with its culmination at the Cross, tells us how he did that.

So God is the God who is there for sinful lives – all sinful lives.

c) He is the God who is there, in comfort and hope, **for our short lives (2c)** – even though *all men are like grass and all their glory is like the flower of the fieldthe word of our God stands for ever*. What a message of comfort and hope this is – for it wasn't

only in Isaiah's day that people were aware of the shortness and impermanence of life. Life is like the grass that withers and the flowers that fall, for us too – and how often we are made starkly aware of this, and how impossible it is to get away from this reality – even in our day when life-span and expectations are probably significantly better than they were 2700 years ago in Isaiah's day.

What a difference it makes when we know that there is the reality of comfort and hope, even in the face of the relative shortness and unavoidable sadness of our human lives.

And this message of comfort and hope is very much at the heart of the message about Jesus Christ, whose coming we celebrate at Christmas. Listen to these remarkable words of comfort and hope, spoken at the time of John the Baptist's birth, as his father, Zechariah pondered the significance of what John would do, and of Jesus for whom he would prepare the way: *To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.*

And we could go on to think through how Jesus fulfilled that comfort and hope for short lives, during his ministry to others at times of death, and through the victory of his own death and resurrection.

So Isaiah spoke about **Comfort and Hope** for Struggling Lives, for Sinful Lives, for Short Lives And **these much needed realities** are all at the heart of the chapters that tell us about the birth of Jesus, and were truly fulfilled by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people, said the angel – and it is news of Comfort and Hope for people like you and me.

2. Much Neglected Glory and Power (3)

It is impossible to emphasise God's comfort and hope too much! But it is certainly possible to under-emphasise God's glory and power – and so to do God the very serious disservice of making

him into some kindly, harmless old gentleman figure who reminds us of another Christmas personality wearing a red suit! We must not ever forget that God is the sovereign God of all the world, with absolute right of judgement and final authority of decision over all people and all situations.

Isaiah ch. 40 will not allow us to under-emphasise or neglect this glory and power of God, and that was a very good thing.

- It was a good thing in that it probably reassured the people, then, that there was a higher power and a greater throne than those of Assyria and Babylon who threatened them so much.

- But it was probably also a good thing to remind them that they needed to be very careful about taking God's comfort and hope for granted – just assuming that God would always be there for them, neglecting and forgetting just who God was, and just how much they needed to think about God, and give him their serious trust. Isaiah would not allow them to do that, and nor must we allow ourselves to do so.

Listen to Isaiah. He talks about *the sovereign Lord who comes with power* (vs. 10) – the great King before whom every road needed to be made straight, every valley and hill flattened, every rough place made level. And if we'd had time to read all of ch.40, we'd have heard Isaiah reminding the people that before God, *the nations are like a drop in a bucket*, and the princes and rulers of the world reduced to nothing (vs. 23). *Do you not know, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth...* (vs. 28)

I wonder, is there ever the danger that this awesome glory and power of God becomes much neglected in our minds, and in the make-up of our faith? Is there a danger that we almost put God in a little box and bring him out when it suits us? Do we ever get close to wanting to choose the parts of God that we like and leave out the parts we don't like? Do we imagine that we can still have all of the comfort and hope of God, without too much of the glory and power?

Listen to Isaiah first of all: *And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.* (vs.5)

What an awesome thought, as we think about what it would be like to be faced, full on, with the majesty, power and glory of God. Remember the time when Moses asked God to show him his glory, and God's reply was, *You cannot see my face for no-one may see me and live.* (Ex.33:20)

We need to try to remember the awesome glory of who God is, and the very serious power of God over our lives and all lives. When we manage to do that, then we will be closer to getting it right.

It is impossible to emphasise God's comfort and hope too much, but it is certainly possible to neglect God's glory and power!

Isaiah would not allow his people to do that – and the record of Jesus' birth still less. Remember how it says that Mary was *greatly troubled* and the shepherds *were terrified* by all that happened to them, and remember even more what it tells us about Jesus in John's Gospel: *We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth ...no-one has ever seen God, but God, the one and only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*

In the person who is Jesus, we meet God in all his glory and power. Yes, we also meet him in all his much needed comfort and hope – but let's make sure that we do not down-play or neglect his glory and power before which no-one can stand.

Let's be very honest with ourselves. Do we prefer the message God's comfort and hope, and downplay the seriousness of God's glory and power? Serious submission of our lives to God is the only antidote!

And that brings us to our final heading.

3. Much Necessary Preparation and Response. (4)

For the dark and uncertain days which Isaiah and his people were living through, the message of God's comfort and hope, God's

glory and power was good news indeed – news to be broadcast far and wide, loud and clear.

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain ...say to the towns of Judah, Here is your God. (vs. 9)

But, at the very same time, Isaiah, with earnest urgency, called the people to prepare themselves and to respond with their own hearts *Prepare the way for the Lord*. Later on in ch. 40 he says this:

Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and nor grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.

He is clearly telling people that they need to prepare themselves by trusting in this God of comfort and hope; this God of glory and power. Therein lies their help for the present and their hope for the future.

It is surely very important that we also understand that this is how the good news and the great hope, that is at the centre of the Christmas chapters, works. The deep love and patient grace and long term hope of God that came into the world in the human life of Jesus Christ requires much necessary preparation and response. It doesn't just happen, it isn't just automatic, no matter who we are, no matter what we're like ...!

At a simple level, the shepherds who heard the angels message about good news of great joy, had to actually go to Bethlehem and *see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about* – and we have to do the same.

In an even more searching and serious way, we have to make our preparations and response to Jesus Christ, in the way that John describes it in his Gospel. He explains that even though Christ came in all the glory and power of God, and with all the fullness of God's comfort and hope, *he was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*

(4b) *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...*' (Jn.1:12)

We cannot really miss the message about much necessary preparation and response – or can we?

I'm afraid that we can and we do!

a) Sometimes we don't see it clearly yet – we don't see that in Jesus Christ, we have received the full truth of God – in all his love and comfort and hope; in all his most awesome glory and power, in all of his final say over all life, including our own.

Perhaps today, we see it just a little bit more clearly:

The glory of the Lord will be revealed, said Isaiah.

We **have** seen his glory ...*full of grace and truth*, says John.

b) But sometimes we have seen, and we do understand fairly well. The problem is not really to do with unanswered questions about God or about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The problem is that we are not yet willing to make the necessary preparation and response in the reality of our own lives. All of us have a continuing preparation and response to make – but some of us have yet to begin!

Until we do so, the assurance of God's comfort and hope is not at all sure for our lives.

Until we do so, we neglect the reality of God's glory and power at our peril.

We need to make our preparation and we need to affirm our response to the *God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort* (as Paul explains it to the Corinthians (2 Cor.1:3)

Perhaps Isaiah, the Christmas prophet can help and encourage us to do so, even today and over Christmas 2004:

A voice of one calling: In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord.

Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint. (Repeat the 3 headings):

(5) Much Needed Comfort and Hope.

Much Neglected Glory and Power

Much Necessary Preparation and Response

(1) Picture of Comfort from Casualty www.bbc.co.uk/casualty

(2) **Much Needed Comfort and Hope.**

(2a) **For our struggling lives**

(2b) **For our sinful lives**

(2c) **For our short lives**

(3) **Much Neglected Glory and Power**

(4) **Much Necessary Preparation and Response.**

(4b) *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...* (Jn.1:12)

(5) **Much Needed Comfort and Hope.**

Much Neglected Glory and Power

Much Necessary Preparation and Response

Children's Talk

Boys and Girls, I want you to look at the picture on the screens and put up your hand (don't shout out) if you know where this place is. (Slemish)

It's a very big hill/mountain called Slemish which you can see very easily if you drive up the Rashee Rd and over the Collin. Anybody ever climbed up Slemish? It's really quite steep, and sometimes slippery.

You can see Slemish for miles around, and up on the top there is a wonderful view.

Isaiah, the Bible prophet we just read from, talked about going up to the top of a high mountain so that he could shout out the good news about God to everyone.

He wanted everybody to hear that God was so good that he never stopped loving people, and that God was so great that no-one else could ever be more important or more powerful.

*Go up on a high mountainlift up your voice with a shout;
Say to the towns of Judah, Here is your God.*

A high hill was a good place for making sure that everybody could hear him and see him – because he knew that what he had to tell them about God was too important for anybody to miss out.

Churches always have a high place so that everybody can see and hear the message about God – it's called the Pulpit – where everybody can see the minister and hear the message from the Bible – although nowadays we also have screens to help us as well.

The message about God is so, so important that we have to do everything we possibly can to make sure that everybody sees clearly and hears well.

Maybe if Isaiah was around today he might also use the Internet and Text Messages, and every other way that he could find, in order to make sure that everybody heard.

(Could we put up a screen with the church web site on it?)

What was it that he so much, wanted people to hear ?

He told them that God is like a very caring and loving Shepherd – who knows each one of us the way a shepherd knows all the sheep – and who cares very much about all of them – that there is nothing he wouldn't do to help them and keep them safe – and that even when they are disobedient sheep who won't listen to, or follow, the shepherd, he never gives up.

Isaiah wanted everybody to hear that message, and he did everything he could to make sure they did – he went up on a high mountain and shouted out the news.

Shepherds came to visit Jesus when his life on earth started at Christmas – but, even more importantly, when he grew up Jesus said, *I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me and I lay down my life for the sheep.*

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who came from God to be our shepherd – that's why he was born at Christmas – that's why the angels announced that they had good news of great joy for everyone.

That's why we need to learn to trust and follow Jesus all the year round.

Children's Talk

1. Slemish
2. Could we put up a screen with the church web site on it?