

Wednesday March 24

Isaiah 40:1-5 – hope is reborn

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

3 A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

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

5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. " Those words from the Old Testament, the opening words of Isaiah chapter 40, generate echoes. They begin a passage we sometimes hear in church on the run-up to Christmas; if you are musical, you might well think "Aha – Handel's Messiah!"

The words themselves come from centuries earlier than that. We're back once again with the traumatized people of Israel, surviving as best they could as captives in Babylon, their beloved Jerusalem sacked and its temple destroyed. You might remember how we started these Lent reflections in the same place with those words from Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept".

Year after year the captives eked out their miserable existence in a place they didn't want to be. And all of a sudden these words are addressed to them: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. " Isaiah's message is extended over a couple of dozen chapters in our bibles. It would take too long to unpack everything they say, but let's concentrate today on their starting point, comfort: get ready, says your God; you're going home!

After all they've been through, here's something new: a message of HOPE. That's the theme I want us to think about for a few days before we enter Holy Week.. In Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, for example, we meet the clerk Wilkins Micawber, for whom hope meant waiting for something to turn up but without any real grounds for believing that it actually would. But in the case of the exiles in Babylon, they could have hope solidly based on the word of their God. And therein lies the specific way in which the bible uses the word HOPE.

Meanwhile, after the darkness of the past year, things are just beginning to change. We might not be going back to the way things were before the pandemic, we're going to live with a 'new normal'. There might be things about this new normal that we don't like; but is it possible that there will be things about it that are going to be *better* than in the old one? The Old Testament prophet Joel said that when the Holy Spirit came to dwell within God's people, they would see visions and dream dreams. Perhaps those dreams and visions will help us to see what could be better in the future 'normal' than in the old one. Writing in *The Times* on January 23, Matt Bird wrote this:

"...the challenge is to cling on in faith to our God who has overcome death, so that together as His Church, with hope-filled vision and deep joy, we can work to transform unjust structures and gross inequalities, in our own neighbourhoods and across the world."

Yes?