

Sermon 2nd Sunday of Advent, Yr. B @ St Johns – 6/12/20

“Comfort, comfort” (Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8)

- Pastor André Meyer

Text... Pray: Father, bless us with your Spirit to renew and refresh our hearts, in Jesus' name, Amen.

It's been a difficult year for *everyone*, hasn't it? Facing the challenges of COVID-19: forced lockdown, personal isolation, distancing, restrictions and the loss of many of our freedoms. We've grieved personal contact with loved ones. We've been unsettled by depression, sadness, frustration or by fear of the unknown. We've heard of international tensions and riots; uncertain financial markets; the instability of employment, businesses, and rental properties; the cost of living and the availability of goods have all affected people as well... indeed COVID has brought uncertainty on many fronts, impacting us in our very homes and personal lives.

COVID aside, we've also seen troubles overcome friends and loved ones. Though safe with the Lord, we grieve the absence of those who have died. Empty spaces have opened up where there was once presence, joy, laughter, and, life. Health difficulties, sickness or frailty may also have threatened *you*. Depression, worry or anxiety may have come knocking at your door. Some people have been 'running on empty' for a while; some are exhausted. Our sense of hopefulness for the future may be diminished, or, we may have little energy to deal with the cares of those around us.

You may feel the weariness of the years. You may have been discouraged by the careless words of others who are tired or hurt themselves. You might be hurting inside yourself. You might be struggling with a sin that eats away at you inside. Life may even seem to be backwards. Where is the hope? Where is the peace? You may at times even feel that God has given up and abandoned you... that He has turned His face away from you...

God's people, over 500 years before the birth of Christ, were discouraged as well. Jerusalem had been captured and finally destroyed by the Babylonians, and a large group of people exiled into the faraway lands of Babylon. God's people had taken a huge hit by war – in fact, a whole generation was killed off and missing. Their place of worship, a symbol of God's gracious protection and presence with them, was totally destroyed (c.586 BC) – not one stone of Solomon's Temple was left standing on another. Their homes had been demolished and ravaged by the invaders, and their loved ones had died. These exiles, now living in a foreign land, were grieving deeply for all they'd lost.

Even from God's prophets, particularly Isaiah (who prophesied many years before) and Jeremiah and Ezekiel (who prophesied in the era of the Babylonians), had only seemed to have come prophecies of judgement and destruction! And then it happened; they had been utterly defeated. Now, every day God's exiled people saw

a nation and culture strong and in the heyday of its prime and achievements, but they themselves were demoralised. Everything about the Babylonians cried out strength, pride, wealth, power and success. It was like salt in their wounds. It seemed as if God had allowed His people and their relationship with Him to be tested and destroyed. Yes, perhaps because of their persistent sins against Him, for their wandering ways and their love affairs with foreign gods. God had separated His people from their once proud and self-sufficient lives. He'd taken their worldly identity from them – and now they were once again like nomads in a foreign land, just as they had been years ago in the wilderness with Moses. But *why* had God allowed this? To punish them? Perhaps...

But perhaps God let their enemies overtake them *for a time*, so that, His people would seek their God once more and trust more fully in Him in a new way. Perhaps He let them undergo this trial so they would once again return to Him, repent of their ways, and call upon Him in prayer and true worship once more. Perhaps, so that they could be given *new* hearts with a renewed trust and faith in Him. ...Sometimes some things need to end before new beginnings can take shape.

...And into this open slate, this wasteland and desert of the heart, into this new and *unknown* future prepared by suffering, grief and exile, and, into the void of their own despair ...God spoke. He spoke through Isaiah – a prophecy spoken over 100 years earlier, but now it was heard anew, and rediscovered by the *listening* ears and *ready* hearts of His people: “*Comfort, comfort my people [be doubly or totally at peace!], says your God. 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. A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God...”* In other words, get rid of everything that hinders the coming of the LORD, for He Himself is coming to save you and to bring something new. “*...And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it...”* (Isa. 40:1-5).

We learn that it is through life’s hardships where God renews the vision of His people in the most unreachable place – their hearts. It is through suffering that God creates a vision of something new from something old that could never have been seen before. The message of “*good news*” of which Isaiah prophesy’s (v.9) is of God’s love and care for His people, and His salvation which was at hand. We know it ultimately came through the coming of Christ, and His new age... This is what they were to prepare for. For the present age was drawing to an end (v.6).

Along with a new age, God’s Messiah would usher in and make possible a new relationship with God. He would make it possible for all people to be gathered close and near to God; to have new hearts, and, a *new life* with Him. And, God’s coming servant would make this new relationship possible through His very own way of trial, suffering, and death. But out of it, God’s people would have a new hope to inspire their voice of prayer and praise to Him (v.9). These new hearts would be filled by the

Spirit of God, and renewed to follow in God's ways (Ezek. 36:26-27). New hearts for old, filled with new directions, new beginnings, new dreams and possibilities. Through His Son, Jesus Christ, who gave His life on the cross, *all people* can now have this new relationship with God.

God does His work miraculously, *not necessarily* with a new generation of people, but He does it powerfully through raising up *old vessels, broken people* – old servants (like you and me) but *made new* by God's Spirit. Our Heavenly Father makes new and useful vessels out of old – and He begins here today. ...Turn from your old ways and come to God for new life. Receive the love of God *today* through His Son. Let your hearts that have burned cold, lukewarm, or on their own, be made new and white hot by God's love and grace.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Hear the *good news!* In other words: *"Take heart my precious children! You are my people who will bear the Son of God; I will restore the broken hearted so that their joy will be renewed; I will heal the hurting and forgive their sins that haunt them,"* says our LORD. *"Comfort, comfort my people..."*

Just as Isaiah, John the Baptist eventually came to prepare God's people and to remind them of God's great love for them – that He had *not* forgotten them. In fact, John was sent to prepare the way for the coming of *God Himself!* So, John called people to return from their spiritual wanderings, to turn their hearts back to God, to confess their wrongs, so that He could wash and cleanse them, and bring them healing, forgiveness, and peace. And still, the call holds true for us to prepare the same way *today*. Although we *already* know God's Saviour, Jesus, the Christ – the One filled with the Spirit of God – *God* in human flesh.

God did not intend to make a few cosmetic or superficial changes by sending Jesus into the world. He intended nothing less than to change the whole human heart. God reminds us that Christmas isn't really about presents, food, Christmas trees, or a jolly old man in a red suit. Christmas is about a righteous and yet, merciful God, who loves broken human beings (like you and me) so much, that He sent His Son to give His life to redeem us from our sins, to give us true hope, life everlasting and joy and peace with God forever.

"Look and see," says Isaiah, *"the Sovereign LORD comes... He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart..."* (Isa. 40:10-11). Isn't this the Saviour Jesus we know? Yes, it is. *This* is the vision of restoration God gave to His hurting and exiled people.

This Advent, let us prepare to celebrate God's love for us, humbly wrapped up in the person of His only Son, Jesus. *Nothing*, not even the sins of all humankind will stop Him coming to give us new hearts and lives if we will receive *Him*. *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."* Amen.