

Comfort, Comfort my people

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

Context:

- Israel is in exile in Babylon
- Prophecy of Isaiah 39:6-7 has come true
- Exiles seem to be well organized
- They seem to enjoy the benefits of Babylonian life; they have religious freedom even though they have no temple worship and can't offer sacrifices
- God is talking to the Divine Heavenly Council or the community of the prophets and the passage reminds us of the heavenly council in Micaiah's prophecy in 1 Kings 22:19-23
- Passage seems to constitute the call of the prophet in Second Isaiah and it also reminds us of the calls of Isaiah in Is. 6 and of Jeremiah in Jer. 1
- Passage reminds us also about the Exodus event as it talks about another exodus this time from Babylonian exile and not Egyptian oppression. It is not about going to a new virgin land flowing with milk and honey but going back home to ruined cities and to the arduous task of reconstruction.

Message:

- Comforting God's people in their exilic context
- Cry demands a word of comfort to be given to God's people
- Our common use and understanding of the word "Comfort" is different to what the council or prophets are required to do. It is not simply saying, "Don't worry, everything will be alright"; or "It does not really matter"; or "It's really not that bad". But that it is very bad, in fact, it is appalling! But God has or is doing something about it – see what God is doing!
- God is changing the situation. Your situation is not going to be forever the same. See the great transformation God is bringing about.
- There are four cries in the passage three of which show how the comfort of v. 1 will come about; (1) vs 1-2 Comfort and speak tenderly (to the heart) of God's people; (2) vs 3-5 an announcement by a council member similar to a royal announcement perhaps in Babylon. The announcement is about the dawning of a new era inaugurated by God's word. The NT links the voice of v. 3 with John the Baptist in the synoptic gospels; (3) vs. 6-8 Prophet's response to the admonition to cry out – he acknowledges reality of an untransformed reality

(people still die and reprieve is only temporal) but being convinced that true reality is in the eternal transforming word of God; (4) vs 9-11 Word to the city of Jerusalem that awaits the return of her children confirming that war is indeed over. God is once again shepherding his people. Hope is infused into the Advent of shepherd King.

Application:

Gospel writers used this passage to challenge and help people for the coming of the Messiah Matt. 3:1-12; Lk. 3:4-20; Mk. 1:2-8. The message was very challenging and far from comforting in the ears of some – in fact it was disturbing.

Imagine(think about your own local contexts too):

1. You are in Pakistan. How does one comfort God's people in Pakistan in the places devastated by the earthquake? Or
2. You are in Iraq. How do you proclaim a message of comfort to Iraqis who are experiencing pain, death hopelessness everyday? Or
3. Those affected by the hurricanes in the USA
4. Those in Niger, Malawi and many sub-Saharan countries devastated by famine, HIV/AIDS, Malaria and oppressive regimes in some countries? Or
5. Here in Europe – how do you comfort the asylum seekers, refugees – the many who are in exile here some of whom like the exiles in Isaiah 40 have settled and doing well?
6. How do you convince people of change? How do you move those who are already comfortable, settled and secure? How will your message be received? Isaiah must have had a mammoth task before him and so do we!
 - Yet it is the same message that we read this and every advent season. The comfort proclaimed in Isaiah 40 was a transforming comfort from an exile situation to a home going one. As we hear these words once again, let us also be involved in a transforming comfort of people in their various conditions such as from war into peace, from famine into plenty of food; from oppression into freedom; from disease into disease free, from having nothing into having something; from death into life; from subhuman conditions to full human conditions.
 - In other words, in the words of Isaiah 40:3 “create a super highway in the wilderness of poverty, disease, prejudice, injustice, war, death, famine etc where all these conditions are transformed into their opposites”

- How can this be? Is this possible? Yes, it is by God's grace. And God's glory will be revealed.

- We can express our longings in the words of the Advent hymn:

O come O come Emmanuel

And ransom captive Israel

That mourns in lonely exile here

Until the Son of God appear

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