

Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-11

Introduction

Well, we're going to come to our passage now. What do you see when you look outside your window? What do you see when you look at your own life and your own circumstances? How do you see life, the universe and everything?

I've called this new series "Seeing the world through prophetic eyes", and what I mean by that is that God has a way in which he wants us to see the world we live in. He has a way that he wants us to think about our lives and how they fit into this sometimes-crazy world that we live in. He doesn't just want to affect how we spend our Sundays or what box we tick on the census: He wants to change the very way we see ourselves and life here in this world. He wants us to have a certain mindset, a certain set of goggles or lenses that he wants us to see everything else with. Not some that we make up for ourselves, not rose-tinted ones that give us a false impression of our world or ourselves, not equally grey-tinted ones that actually give us a false impression of those things as well. He wants to give us prophetic ones - ones that have been revealed to us, ones that see behind and beyond what's in front of us. Ones that don't hide or taint reality, but show us the true reality that's there for those who have eyes to see.

God used people down through history to reveal the lens on reality that he wanted his people to see through. One such man was a man called Isaiah. Isaiah lived in turbulent times in the 8th Century BC. Assyria and Babylon were becoming world powers on the world stage. There was war between the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Southern Kingdom of Judah, where he prophesied. The Northern Kingdom was destroyed altogether during his time, and carried off into exile in Assyria, never to return. That left only the Southern Kingdom of Judah to go it alone against huge world powers. And just over a hundred years' after Isaiah's prophecies Babylon carried away Judah into exile too.

Now, Isaiah's words in the passage that we have this morning were for those exiles. Written over a hundred years in advance, to help them see what was happening to them, and to comfort them in their exile, and to give them hope for the future. God wanted to give them prophetic goggles to see their exile through.

Now we too are in a sort of exile at the moment, scattered and unable to gather. I don't want to push this too far, I mean we're not sat by the rivers of Babylon weeping over Zion, are we? And it's not that God has done this as judgement for us. But we are scattered... and we are weeping... and we are uncertain of the future. What does God have to say to us through the prophet Isaiah this morning? Well, four points this morning. Seeing prophetically first of all means focussing on what people really need.

Focussing on what people really need (v1-2)

Have a look again at Isaiah 40, verses 1 and 2:

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her*

*that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

God wanted his people to be comforted. They had been through so much and now is the time for comfort. Now, let's not forget that it was God who put them through all that. But now is the time for comfort, not for judgement. God wants Isaiah to share this good news with them, that their sins have been paid for, that their time has been served. He says they have received double for their sins - that's not saying that God has been unfair, it's more another way of saying they have already received a 'shed load' for their sins. There is nothing more to pay- judgement is over, comfort is coming.

God wants Isaiah to give a message of comfort to the people. Not that he's to ignore what they've done, what sent them into exile - in fact Isaiah spent 39 chapters talking about it! But now is the time for comfort.

Part of seeing the world prophetically is seeing that people need comfort as well as rebuke. Christians down the ages have been very good at the rebuke and not so good at the comfort! I think that today we've done a full 360 degrees (or 180 degrees), we're much better at comfort and not so good at the rebuke. But pockets of the old still exist, and they're in each one of us as well. There is a time for rebuke, but there is also a time for comfort.

I remember, a while back, being given some feedback on something that I'd done that I thought hadn't gone very well. The person giving the feedback said, "Let's take all the positive stuff for granted and we'll just focus on what you did wrong". Well, by the end of it I was crushed. I already knew all the stuff that I'd done wrong, what I actually needed was a bit of comfort!

As we live in this world God has given us, we need to remember that we are fragile creatures, we are flesh and blood. We need to hear the message of coming judgement, of course! Don't hear me wrong. We need to hear that our sin alienates us from God and that places us under God's wrath - yes. But we also need to hear that message of comfort. Jesus died to end that alienation. Jesus died so that we don't have to face God's wrath, if we just put all our trust in Him.

And in that sense the context for our comfort, and for theirs, is the same. Our sins have been paid for; our time has been served. A shedload of judgement has been received for our sins. The difference is, though, in our time, that Jesus has taken that punishment for us. Our time has been served by someone else- our sins have been paid for by Jesus Christ. He received a shedload of judgement instead of us, and there is now nothing more to pay. Jesus took it all.

So, if you're a believer this morning, isn't that a great comfort? As much as others need to hear that message of comfort, we need to be reminded of it too - we're flesh and blood after all. Your sins have been paid for, your time has been served, and you need comfort too, not just rebuke. If your internal monologue is only at harsh rebuke, then you need to get a biblical balance. You, as a believer, need comfort too! God knows we need it - that's

why he's put it there for us - and you do not know better than God, do you? So remember to not just to rebuke, even just for ourselves, we need that comfort too.

And if you're not a believer this morning, just think what joy that would be to know that forgiveness that we've been talking about. That wipes away your mistakes, your past and your guilt. A leading psychiatrist a number of years ago said that if they could just look their clients in the eye and tell them they were forgiven they could dismiss half of their patients straight away! People make out that Christianity is one long guilt trip, but true Christianity is quite the opposite. It is the promise of the freedom from guilt, knowing that you are forgiven. A freedom from a past that would weigh us down and do us harm. Wouldn't you want that?

But there's more... more comfort for his people, more that God wants us to know and to see and see through. The second thing is that we are to focus on what's coming.

Focussing on what's coming (v3-5)

Have a look at verses 3 to 5:

*A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
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.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

What other comfort is there in exile? Well, focussing on what's coming. We see here in this strange passage, a disembodied voice cries in the wilderness *"prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God"*. The picture here is of a highway, a motorway if you like, in the wilderness. A road that cuts through the mountains and bridges and valleys. In fact, the picture is that the valleys are filled in to make way for this road. It's a bit like at the top of the M62 over by Saddleworth moor and Scammonden dam – I'll show you a picture - the workers literally cut through the hills so that that motorway could get through, they bridged over whole valleys just so the road would be flat and straight. Flatten the hills is what he cries! Fill in the valleys! Make the bumpy ground flat; make the rough ground smooth for the king's highway!

In the ancient world, this sort of thing really happened. Whole new roads would be built for visiting emperors and kings. Just think about what happens when a city gets to host the Olympic games, the upheavals that happen putting in stadiums and transport links. A visitor is coming and the way must be prepared for them. A king is coming and his highway must be ready.

Well here, the King is coming, he's coming to Jerusalem and he is bringing his people with him. The exile will end as God himself will come and bring his people home. The glory of the Lord will appear as he leads his people in a new exodus, out of Babylon and back into the

promised land. As they languish in exile, God is giving them hope. The end is coming, I am coming - and I will bring you home! "So get the road ready", is what he's saying! "We're going home!" says God.

But when did this happen? Is it something still to come in the future? Did it happen in the 6th century BC, when the exiles returned home? Well the Bible's surprising answer is that it happened when Jesus turned up on the scene. Matthew, Mark and Luke all talk about this passage as referring to John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. In fact, if you know this verse, you probably know it from there. John the Baptist is God's bulldozer. He is the one God sent to make way for his appearing. He was the voice in the wilderness getting the people ready for God showing up to bring his people home. And that's exactly what he did - that's why these verses are quoted about him

But if you think about it, that means this passage has huge implications for how we think about all sorts of things. The first thing is that if you haven't twigged yet, Jesus was no mere man, He was God himself. God the Son in human flesh, that's who Jesus was. The appearance of Jesus was the appearance of God Himself to our world – that's what it's saying by using these verses from John the Baptist.

The second thing is what Jesus came to do. Why is God showing up in Isaiah? Well, he's showing up to bring his people home from exile. But, wait a second, hadn't they come home over 500 years ago? Don't we read about it in Ezra and Nehemiah in the Bible? Well, yes, they did come home... but not really, not like the way God spoke of their return - a glorious new Exodus, with a glorious new temple, when the glory of the Lord would be revealed. That hadn't happened, so in one sense they're still in exile. At home in the land... but still far away from their God.

But now Jesus has come to end their exile, their real exile. To end their alienation from God, to bring them back to Him. And only Jesus can do that. He's come to end the exile that we've all been in really since Eden. He's come to bring us back to God. Jesus is the great exile-ender, making peace between God and man and bringing them together. The weird thing is though that being brought back to God, bizarrely makes us exiles again. Because when we're brought back to God we're no longer at home in this world.

And so now we await the time when Jesus will return to bring us home to glory. On that day all flesh **will** finally see Him! All exiles will be ended. One day we will no longer be pilgrims in this world, but we will be finally home truly. Until then we wait in our own exile, not knowing when it will end, but knowing that it definitely will end - just as God's people back then were to know that their exile too would end one day.

And if we know what's coming then we will live in the light of what's coming. Not living for this world, but the world to come, aware that we'll never truly be comfortable in this passing world. But how do we know that this is definitely going to happen? How do we know that we're not just deluding ourselves? Well, part of seeing the world through prophetic eyes is focussing on what's certain.

Focussing on what's certain (v6-8)

Have a look at verses 6 –8:

*A voice says, "Cry!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Focussing on what's certain. Men and women, flesh and blood, here are but grass - here today and gone tomorrow. Now, I don't know about the grass near you, but the grass near us is certainly true of that. Most of it is dead, at the moment, because of the scorching sun. The sun's been, the wind's been, and it's been blasted and most of it is dead. But it's even worse in the Middle East where Isaiah was. Some plants and grasses would last only a few days until the scorching desert wind would burn them away.

If you think about it, this here is talking about people rather than flowers, and on a global scale some of the greatest ideas of the greatest men and women, are here today and gone tomorrow, like grass. Think of all those men and isms that people have lived and died for: Marxism, Fascism, Royalism, Anarchism. Wars were fought over these things and they're now basically nothing.

But we do it on a personal level too: we build our lives on people who are flesh and blood, here today, and gone tomorrow. Hezekiah in chapter 39 of Isaiah seemed to be a sure bet, didn't he? He seemed to be a good king, good to get advice from, a man that you can rely on. Then look at him in verse 8 of the previous chapter. Isaiah warned him of the oncoming exile to Babylon, but instead of declaring a nation-wide fast or prayer, or anything, he just thinks, "Great, that's not happening to me!" He does the copout, Bono line in the Band Aid Christmas song: "Tonight thank God it's them instead of you".

People, flesh, even kings, cannot be relied on. It may seem secure to cling to them, but it's not. All flesh is like grass. If we put our trust in people, if we bind all our happiness and security in a human being, no matter how lovely or reliable, then we are going to end up at best disappointed, or at worst burnt or broken. Human beings were not meant to bear the weight of all our hopes and dreams.

We see it in politics as people live and die for their hero, their idol, who just in the end turns out to be just like them, flesh and blood. There's a telling line in the song 'O what a circus' from the musical Evita about Eva Peron, a political and spiritual leader of Argentina. The narrator sings about her: "You let down your people, Evita. You were supposed to have been immortal. That's all they wanted. Not much to ask for. But in the end, you could not deliver." And that is true for all flesh isn't it?

We see it too though in the home. A marriage partner, a parent, or a child who is made the repository of all our hopes and dreams, who when they're taken away, or when they do not live up to our expectations, destroy us.

All flesh is grass, the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. What he's saying here is there is something more secure more than people: The

word of God. If we want to see the world through prophetic eyes, we need to know that flesh is flimsy, but scripture is solid. If you want something you can really rely on, something you can build a whole life upon, the word of God is it. When people around you fail, when the world around you begins to tumble, the word of God is solid ground for you.

Why? Because it's **God's** word. Our words as human beings are neither here nor there: we have politicians who lie, parents who lie, pastors, even, who lie. But the word of God cannot lie, it cannot fail, it cannot fall. God wants us to know that we can trust in His word. Not that we make the Bible an idol, but we trust in God's Word because we trust in God. Let's not drive a wedge between God and His word! Because God is reliable, His word is reliable. Because He is faithful, we can be certain of His Word.

And this is so important if we want to see our world prophetically. Because the world has one message, and God's Word has another. And day by day we are confronted with a choice - who will we believe? The world, or God's Word? The world tells us one thing about our world, about ourselves, about our future and the word of God tells us a different story. Who's take on reality are we going to believe? If we want to see things as God wants us to see them, we need to put certain things before our eyes, if you like, things that are certain, not what is fleeting and fallible. We need to cling to God's word, not the fickle opinions of flesh and blood.

Now, in our last section a command is given by God to his people. If they've understood everything so far about what it means to see the world through prophetic eyes, then things in their own lives have got to change, even while they are still in exile. Our last section is focussing on what's worth shouting about.

Focussing on what's worth shouting about! (v9-11)

*Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"
Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.*

God tells the people of Zion to go up on a high mountain and to shout out the good news. The word there in verse 9 'herald of good news' - when translated into Greek, into the Greek

New Testament, if you like, is the word 'evangelist' – it's the same word for the two. God is commissioning them as evangelists to proclaim the good news to the cities of Judah

Of course, though by this time there would be no-one living in Jerusalem, not Jews really anyway. There would be no-one living in the cities of Judah, again not Jews anyway, they'd all been carted off into exile. The picture is though of a people proclaiming the good news to all and sundry, shouting it from the mountain tops.

What was the good news? Well, we see it there at the end of verse 9, "*Behold your God!*" *Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.* The good news is that God is coming! God is coming with a mighty arm; He's coming with blessings and rewards for his people in verse 10. He's coming like a shepherd and he'll use those mighty arms to gather up his sheep and carry them home. He truly is the good shepherd, here!

Which just reminds us that there was one who claimed to be just this. Jesus showed us what this truly means, John 10:11, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" And John 10:27-28, "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and **no one** will snatch them out of my hand.*"

The good shepherd is good news! And his people are to shout it from the rooftops, to shout it from the mountaintops, the top of the Chevin, the top of the Cow and Calf! Behold your God is coming! If only you knew Him! The good shepherd, the mighty God, the saviour of the world. They're told to proclaim Him from the mountain tops!

And friends they are told to lift their voices high, middle of verse 9, "*Lift it up, fear not!*" If we want to see the world through prophetic eyes it will mean seeing that there is a message the world needs to hear and we need to lift up our voices! We need to hear, that there is something worth shouting about and that something is God.

There's a scene in the TV show Friends when Monica gets engaged to Chandler, and she's so excited she goes out on her balcony and starts shouting, at the top of her voice, "I'm engaged! I'm engaged!". She tells not only her friends, but everybody, it's such good news that she shouts it from the rooftops, almost literally! That's what this has got in mind here. Shout it so that everyone can hear! Don't be afraid of what they say, lift up your voice.

Did you know, I did something like this once? I was on beach missions in mid-Wales about 15 years ago and a group of us went up on a cliff over a beach on a Wednesday evening and, somehow, we starting singing. It wasn't really a deliberate thing- someone just started it off and before we knew it, we had about 15 of us singing how great thou art over this beach. It certainly made a stir on the beach, though it was fairly empty! I'm not sure how effective that really was at spreading the good news!

But we need to take the principle, don't we, that God is worth shouting about, our Good Shepherd, and that everyone needs to hear this message. We need to give it to them, that's what we need to do. If we want to see the world through prophetic eyes, we need to know that this is what's worth shouting about, and actually shout about Him. I'm not saying that we actually "shout" physically, or shout at people, but we need to share that message, because He's important, and He's the Good Shepherd, and He's worth shouting about.

So, what do you see when you look out of your window? What do you see when you look at your own life, or your own circumstances? How do you see life, the universe and everything?

Well hopefully this morning we've begun to see that seeing the world through prophetic eyes means that:

- We will focus our eyes on what people need; comforting, not just rebuking.
- We will focus our eyes on what's coming, not just on the here and now.
- We will focus our eyes on what's certain, not what is fleeting and fading.
- And we will focus our lives on shouting out that wonderful message of our good shepherd to anyone who will hear.

Let's pray that God would give us goggles to see our day to day circumstances this week, in this way.