

The first lesson this morning from Isaiah 40 begins, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." Of course on reading this, the obvious question that must be asked is, why need we comfort?

To answer this, we step back to the first reading of our Lessons and Carols service, from Genesis 3. Humanity as a whole has rebelled against God and, and is thus fallen and cursed, subjected to toil for our food and to travail in childbirth, and ultimately subjected to death. The command had been clear. To Adam God said, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." The literal translation of the text is "dying you shall die." So as the children of Adam, we continue on in this world, but our unredeemed lives, are really a sort of death. Because of our disobedience, we have been banished from the presence of the Lord, and the world has been cursed for our sakes. Dying you shall die. The same term is used of the disobedient Hebrews who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Their lives were subjected to futility until they perished in the desert, and a new generation, who would be obedient, took their places.

The point to this review is just to highlight the fact that curse is real, and every person knows it. We indeed struggle to eek out a living. Childbirth is indeed painful. Relationships between a man and his wife are full of misunderstanding and so many of them end up irreparably broken. I often say that the soundtrack to our lives is a melancholy tune, and even Buddhism begins with the tenant that life is suffering. And at the end of it all, we encounter death. Death haunts us. We struggle to live, but we are afraid to die. There is a melancholy sound-track to human existence. We are afraid to die, struggle to live.

It is in this midst of this toil and travail and brokenness that God speaks to us these words of comfort. The struggle is not eternal. There will be healing. Originally the prophet Isaiah spoke them and recorded them roughly 700 years before the Advent of Christ to the ancient Hebrews who were under attack from the Assyrian Empire. The northern tribes would be captured and exiled into slavery, dispersed throughout that empire. They knew the same futility and fragmentation that we know. Yet God speaks words of comfort to them in the midst of their sorrow. This is not for ever. One day, I will come and make things right.

Fast forwarding to the time of Christ, we read in the gospel lesson, pf John the Baptist using the words of Isaiah to proclaim to the Scribes and Pharisees, that this prophecy was being fulfilled in their very midst. The comfort of God was come to them. Would they receive it?

What specifically did John Baptist proclaim about himself? The lesson reads thus, “Then said they unto him, Who art thou? That we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.” So John the Baptist makes it clear who he was – these religious leaders were familiar with the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah, and John uses these words of himself. They understood that John was not claiming to be the Messiah, but rather was claiming to be the one that would prepare the road for the Messiah.

But then why did he baptize people? Repentance was part of the preparation. John’s baptism was one of repentance. He was preparing the people to receive their king and their god. The time of which Isaiah prophesied and of which John proclaimed, was imminent. “There standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.” The Kingdom of heaven was at hand. The 700 years since the prophet Isaiah were drawing to a close. The very nature of the world would be altered through the ministry of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The sorrow of a broken world was to be healed. The desert would be turned into a garden, the jagged peaks and steep canyons would be smoothed, made accessible, in the beauty of the original creation. The rough places would be made smooth. The glory of the Lord was being revealed, made evident to all the world – for the mouth of the Lord has spoken, and it cannot therefore be impeded. It will be as determined by God.

Continuing in Isaiah 40, we read, “All flesh *is* grass, And all its loveliness *is* like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people *are* grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.”

Our human lives come and go, but God’s Word transcends our individual lives. In the Advent of Christ, God was working His purpose out. In the midst of the futility, God Himself entered into human life, human existence, and became the head of the new humanity, one that is no longer subject to the ultimate death. Dying, we now live. In the resurrection, death itself will be utterly banished. Even now as we are born, live, and die in this world, God is still working His purpose out to draw mankind unto Himself.

In verse 9 of Isaiah 40 we read, “O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be

not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!"

God comes to us to heal and to restore and to save. We are told by Isaiah to proclaim the coming of the Lord with joy, with loud and bold voices. Proclaim the coming of the Messiah, for He comes with might, even when meek as a lamb. God is come to us. God is come to rule in justice, to lead his people with unopposable might, to lead them as the true shepherd who guards and tends his flock.

And yet we, the flock of Jesus the Good Shepherd, still suffer in this world. The good news proclaimed by John Baptist, the herald of Messiah, does not change the fact that we live in a world that isn't yet fully redeemed. We still physically die, we still experience sadness, we are still opposed by the world, the flesh, and the devil. The great secret here is that if Christ suffered as the New Adam, the Truly Righteous Man, as God Incarnate, then we to must embrace the suffering that comes our way in this broken world.

The Kingdom has come, but it is first a Kingdom of restoration of the inner man. The Kingdom, and the healing which it brings, advances individual by individual in this world. It forces itself on no man until Christ comes again; at that time it will be too late to change and every knee will bend, either with gladness and joy or with compulsion, in submission to the Worthy and Righteous Judge.

The presence of Christ brings judgment. To the Pharisees and their ilk, Christ is a threat, whom they misguidedly believe they can control and nullify. Yet in reality, they are the contingent ones. Their very existence depends upon the sovereignty of God; acting in malice towards Him is merely self-condemnation.

But to those who love Christ and have experienced the love of God: "REJOICE in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice." In Christ, we are judged righteous. Behold, we are new Creatures in Christ. The old things have passed away. All things have become new. Can you sense the new life? Can you live in the joy of Christ and let that joy wage war against the world that is filled with pride and vanity, with rage and envy? In Christ we can affirm with the greatest conviction that life is good!

So today, may we hear the words of the prophet, "Comfort, comfort ye my people. Speak ye comfortably to my people, and cry unto them, that their warfare is accomplished, that their iniquity is pardoned: for they have received of the LORD's hand double for all their sins."

We may still have difficulties and trials and sadness in this life. But as children of God and fellow heirs with Christ, we hear His words of comfort. We hear words of forgiveness, words of reconciliation, words of peace, words of love. We hear words of confidence and assurance, words of victory as the people of God overcome the world, and words of promise that one day we will be in the very physical presence of God where there will be no more curse, no more tears, no more sorrow. For now, we have Christ's presence with us. He is in our very midst. The Lord is at hand; He promises to be with us, and He gives Himself to us in His Spirit and in His sacraments.

Oh Lord, You are indeed in our very midst. You are at hand. We pray that we would always gratefully receive this loving and generous blessings. Make us grateful for all Thy gifts. And as we enter into this Christmas season, the season of your Incarnation and of your abiding presence with us, make us keenly aware that we are indeed your temple and that your Spirit dwells with us, bringing into every moment the eternal life which you have given us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.