

Pastoral Letter – July 2020

From The Rev'd Tim Hardingham



Dear friends

This week (7th June) the Old Testament reading is from Isaiah Chapter 40. Reading it and thinking about it, it seems extraordinary how sharply pertinent Isaiah's words are, for us, today. Chapter 40 is the beginning of the section of Isaiah known as Deutero-Isaiah, which we can be reasonably certain was written around 550BC while the Jewish nation, or at least its educated elite, were held in exile in Babylon. 'By the waters of Babylon we lay down and wept' (Psalm 137). The Jewish nation had been conquered, its capital city and temple destroyed, its royal family were in captivity. Their self-perception as a people who would inherit 'a promised land flowing with milk and honey' was in tatters, they had been abducted out of their promised land. And so their national conversation was something like 'Why has this happened to us? We have not done anything to deserve this? Why has God abandoned us?'.

Chapter 40 starts with these beautiful words which Handel has made so famous. 'Comfort, comfort my people says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem' it goes on 'A voice cries "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God"'. These are wonderful words of hope in the most terrible of national situations.

But, chapter 40 continues ... 'Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span ... Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel ... Who taught him the path of Justice'. Isaiah is saying that all we know about how to live together in peace, harmony and prosperity is learned from God.

The chapter moves on. It becomes fierce in its remonstrance 'Do you not know, have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?' Isaiah is indignant with fury at humankind's self-importance, humanity's idea that it understands how the world works and it can construct for itself its own future and prosperity. 'No, No, No,' Isaiah reprimands us, 'you owe peace, justice, prosperity and happiness to God and when humanity starts to think it can do without God it will always be destructive because human values, abstracted from God, are always about selfishness, competition, making the most for ourselves, inevitably at the expense of others'.

For us, in our time, we are beset with the same kind of questions that beset the exilic Israelites. What did we do to deserve this pandemic? Why is human activity destroying the foundations of our prosperity and the security of our future through global warming? What is happening to integrity and truth as fake news shrills through our media and political conversations? Where is justice in a world that justifies profit as the motivation for corporations that have forgotten about service?

Isaiah sets a beautiful, gentle, kindly and loving example to us as Christians. It is for us to speak out, as he does. 'Have you not heard, have you not seen?', We have to allow God to be

in charge. The capitalist market place, the self righteousness of socialism, the leadership of tinpot kings, presidents and prime ministers who think they are right in their own cleverness, will lead humanity and God's beautiful gift of the earth and its resources, to destruction. We must learn that only if power is exercised by servants under the authority of God can we expect an outcome of hope, justice, peace and prosperity for all humanity. Tell that to Donald, Boris, Vladimir, X Jinping, Bashar, Jair Bolsonaro and the rest. We must be Isaiah to our world.

With love

Tim

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