

COMFORT FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

ISAIAH 40

Isaiah and Jeremiah Series

OPENING PRAYER

God, open our hearts that we may love you; open our ears that we may hear you; open our eyes that we may see you; open our minds that we may learn of you; strengthen our wills that we may serve you; in the name of Jesus, Amen.

EXEGESIS

There is here, in several senses, a new beginning. We are now in the time of the Exile in Babylon, some one hundred and fifty years after Isaiah of Jerusalem. The Assyrians have gone, and the Babylonians have sacked Jerusalem, but they too are on the way out. A new prophetic voice is heard, crying in the desert. A new story is emerging as Persia threatens Babylon. Jerusalem, too, will have a new beginning. With Judean life in ruins, all hope has collapsed. The leaders of the community are captive in Babylon. Now, however, a new hope emerges out of the east-Cyrus, King of Persia – both a threat and a promise (41. 2-4; 45. 1-7).

40.6. The silence is shattered. The prophet has been bidden to 'cry aloud'. There is no description of a dramatic event but there is a clear call, giving certainty and conviction. 40. 1-2. This is the primary message: there is hope for Jerusalem. The people will be restored. 40. 3-6. The return will be facilitated by a new imperial highway that gives speed and safety, which will cross the desert directly between Babylon and Jerusalem, rather than go round the Fertile Crescent, through Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Syria. This will be just like the first Exodus under Moses. 40. 6-11, 21-26. God comes to the Exiles to save them because God can sweep away the nations. This is new in the Old Testament. Previously, it was assumed that each nation had its own god. This is the creator God before whom the nations are as nothing (40. 21-24). History, the movement of the nations, is as nothing, like the coming and going of the tide or leaves on the autumn wind. 40. 12-17. This is possible because Yahweh (the Lord) is the creator. If God can cast the stars into the heavens then it is nothing to control the ways of humanity (40. 21-22). 40. 18-20. In the middle of this rhetoric comes the first classical denunciation of idols. Quite simply, these gods are not real; no more real than the idols that represent them. Yahweh, the invisible God is indestructible, even though the Temple has been destroyed. 40. 9-11; 27-31. What kind of God is this? God comes 'with might', sweeping aside any opponents (40. 10). But there is another side: God the shepherd (40. 11-12). This is a familiar Biblical image, not only of God but of those in authority (Ezekiel 34). Thirdly, God the indefatigable creator imparts to the creature the strength that overcomes weakness and hopelessness, enabling the People of God to embark on their perilous journey.

REFLECTION

(i). We assume that there can only be one God. But it is not that simple. When people talk about God they are not always talking about the same thing. So, Blaise Pascal, the C17th French philosopher mathematician, had sewn into his gown a slip of paper which read: ‘Not the God of the philosophers but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’. He contrasted two different views about God: the remote theistic first cause and the God who acted in the world to pursue the good of creation. This latter is Yahweh, the Lord. What Isaiah is claiming is that this God, with this name and history, is the only God. Discuss how different members of the group understand ‘God’. Do any attributes emerge as more central than others? How do they link in with Isaiah’s vision and with ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ of the New Testament?

(ii). Isaiah calls all other gods non-entities. But we know idols can exercise their own fascination. Are there still the equivalent of the ‘gods of the nations’ today? What other idols would you identify? How can they be shown for what they really are?

(iii). God, says Isaiah, is creator. All is under God’s power. Discuss where you find the majesty and mystery of God in the universe? What does this say about ‘the plans of mice and of men’?

(iv). The call to Israel is to take courage, to look at what is happening and to discover God’s strength to overcome weakness and fear. Are there activities and movements in our world that offer hope? How can the spiritual resources offered in the text be tapped into? Where do we find God in the thrust and activity of daily life?

CLOSING PRAYER

Eternal God, you rule in all things from everlasting to everlasting, your ways are hid from us; yet you have manifest yourself in the person of Jesus Christ.

Speak to our hearts when courage fails and we are bewildered, not seeing your presence clearly. Restore our faith in your eternal purposes; renew in us the hope that never fails; lift our eyes to the things that are unseen and eternal; that we may discern and embrace the new things that you have prepared for us, in Christ’s name. Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- John Goldingay: Isaiah for Everyone (SPCK, 2013)