

Wednesday March 24 Isaiah 40:1-5 – hope is reborn

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

3 A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. " Those words from the Old Testament, the opening words of Isaiah chapter 40, generate echoes. They begin a passage we sometimes hear in church on the run-up to Christmas; if you are musical, you might well think "Aha – Handel's Messiah!"

The words themselves come from centuries earlier than that. We're back once again with the traumatized people of Israel, surviving as best they could as captives in Babylon, their beloved Jerusalem sacked and its temple destroyed. You might remember how we started these Lent reflections in the same place with those words from Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept".

Year after year the captives eked out their miserable existence in a place they didn't want to be. And all of a sudden these words are addressed to them: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. " Isaiah's message is extended over a couple of dozen chapters in our bibles. It would take too long to unpack everything they say, but let's concentrate today on their starting point, comfort: get ready, says your God; you're going home!

After all they've been through, here's something new: a message of HOPE. That's the theme I want us to think about for a few days before we enter Holy Week.. In Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, for example, we meet the clerk Wilkins Micawber, for whom hope meant waiting for something to turn up but without any real grounds for believing that it actually would. But in the case of the exiles in Babylon, they could have hope solidly based on the word of their God. And therein lies the specific way in which the bible uses the word HOPE.

Meanwhile, after the darkness of the past year, things are just beginning to change. We might not be going back to the way things were before the pandemic, we're going to live with a 'new normal'. There might be things about this new normal that we don't like; but is it possible that there will be things about it that are going to be *better* than in the old one? The Old Testament prophet Joel said that when the Holy Spirit came to dwell within God's people, they would see visions and dream dreams. Perhaps those dreams and visions will help us to see what could be better in the future 'normal' than in the old one. Writing in *The Times* on January 23, Matt Bird wrote this:

“...the challenge is to cling on in faith to our God who has overcome death, so that together as His Church, with hope-filled vision and deep joy, we can work to transform unjust structures and gross inequalities, in our own neighbourhoods and across the world.”

Yes?

Thursday March 25 Ezekiel 37:1-14 – hope reborn

1 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

2 He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.

3 He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

4 Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’

5 This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.

6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’ ”

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.

8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

9 Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’ ”

10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

11 Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’

12 Therefore prophecy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.

14 I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’ ”

Yesterday we thought about HOPE and weeping by the rivers of Babylon, made into a hit record in 1978 by *Boney M.*

Another Old Testament passage from the same period was made into a song, written some 50 years earlier than that by James Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, and first recorded by a group called The Famous Myers Jubilee Singers. It’s called ‘Dem Dry Bones’. You might recognise another prophet here, Ezekiel this time, with his vision in chapter 37 of a valley filled with dry bones.

In a vision God tells Ezekiel to command the bones to come back to life, which they do. The bones come together, joined by tendons, they’re covered in flesh, but there’s something

missing. Then they stand up, but there's still something missing, and they wail, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." Now we know what is missing: HOPE.

This passage isn't about resurrection and going to heaven when you die. It's about a nation that has undergone a disaster being restored. Yesterday we were thinking about God announcing to the exiles hanging on for dear life in a foreign land far away that they were going home. But as other parts of the Old Testament show, when they got back, things were tough. Read, for example, the book of Nehemiah, which Bishop David McClay is using his Lent talks in the Diocese of Down and Dromore. If things were tough, and not at all what they'd been hoping for in their 'new normal', it's not difficult to hear them saying "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."

To which to which you might expect God to say "Stop moaning! Pull yourselves together and get on with it!" But in Ezekiel chapter 37 God's words are not of rebuke but of promise: I'll open the graves you're still lying in, I'll bring you out and give you new HOPE. I wonder if there's some sort of parallel with what we're going through at the moment. If I'm right, two questions bubble to the surface that are worth pondering. The first is this: in what ways are we still pessimistic about the future? Perhaps being overwhelmed by the thought of all that money the government has borrowed in the past year being paid back: how on earth is that going to be possible without yet more hardship?

And here's the second question: if God is still in the business of restoring HOPE to peoples that have none left, what sort of difference would it make if we really 'do God' rather than ignore Him? But please forget about a bit more religion and a few eloquent prayers: it surely has to be something far deeper than that.

Friday March 26 1 Corinthians 11:17-26 – the hope-filled meal

17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.

18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.

19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.

20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat,

21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.

22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,

24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Many of us have felt a keen sense of loss at not being able to gather together at Holy Communion this past year. Christians have been doing it since the earliest days of the church; Paul's description in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 is our earliest record, earlier even than the written accounts in the gospels. So let's revisit exactly what it is we do at a Holy Communion service. I suggest that when we concentrate just on receiving the bread and the wine, and what they signify, we can lose sight of two important elements.

One of them is that we are gathering *together* at the Holy Communion table. It originates in the supper that Jesus had with his disciples before He was taken from them, and we do it because He told us to. "Do this in remembrance of me". It's a family meal rather than a private encounter between you and your Lord. That's why Paul gave the Christians in Corinth a telling off in 1 Corinthians chapter 11; everyone was doing their own thing. So when we gather at Holy Communion together, we receive the bread and the wine together, because we are all in need of the salvation that Jesus offers us through His death on the cross. All the distinctions we think are important vanish at the Lord's Table: unionist and nationalist, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, academic high flyer and bottom half of the class at school, one whose relationship with the Lord brings constant joy and the one who struggles with faith – we are in equal need of the grace of God and we express this when we gather *together* at the Holy Communion table.

But listen also to what Paul tells the Corinthians about the Lord's Supper. It's all about the theme of this group of reflections - HOPE: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes.*" Or remember the words we say together during the Prayer of Consecration: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; *Christ will come again*". Easy to overlook this dimension of Christian hope, even if we believe that death is not the end but the gateway to what we call heaven, where in the Father's house are many mansions which Christ has gone before to prepare for us.

Tomorrow I shall suggest that our vision of what Christ is still doing and will one day bring to glorious completion is limited; what we call 'heaven' is far bigger than our imaginations can cope with. But it's still something which we ought not to forget, especially at a time when the pandemic has taken so many and so much from us, perhaps even HOPE itself.

Saturday March 27 Revelation 21:1-7 – our ultimate hope

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.

7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Two thousand deaths in Northern Ireland, two thousand funerals, many in nearly-deserted churches, just a few mourners, the minister, perhaps an organist, the undertaker and his colleagues. If ever there was a setting where HOPE seemed to have vanished without trace, this was it.

I recall the occasions when I was a curate and then a rector, sitting with grieving families and asking them about the hymns and scripture readings they wanted for the funeral they had to arrange. There were some favourites – if that was the right word – the 23rd Psalm, 1 Corinthians 13, that passage from John’s Gospel about the many mansions in the Father’s house. There was another one, a striking passage from near the end of the book of Revelation, with its God-given vision that the aged and exiled John saw: “[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” You can see the power these words will have for some bereaved families; it’s particularly appropriate when death has followed great suffering, whether it’s Covid or cancer or something else.

And why have all these things passed away? Because, in John’s vision, he saw “... a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.” So the vision is not just about the end of something old, which includes Covid and all other nasty viruses; it’s also about something new, something glorious, something permanent, something that completes the work that Christ came to do and is still doing. That, in a nutshell, is what Christian HOPE is all about, and it’s far bigger than our comforting but limited views of heaven as a nice place we go to when we die. This is about a renewed, transformed creation, united with heaven itself into something so mind-boggling that you can only glimpse it in a vision. What, I wonder, will it be like to be part of it? It was C.S. Lewis who did a really good job putting it into words in his Narnia book *The Last Battle*. This is what he writes:

'The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.'