

Comfort

Give Comfort to My People

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “comfort”? A well-appointed home? Modern appliances and amenities that make your life easier? A soft bed? A downy pillow? I suppose all of these images and others come to mind. But in today’s first reading from the Prophet Isaiah, the Prophet speaks of another kind of comfort, the comfort and consolation that only God can bring.

The Prophet Isaiah proclaimed this prophecy more than four centuries before the birth of Christ, at a period when his people (Israel) were in exile. The Babylonians had conquered them and destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem (the very dwelling place of God), and the people of Israel were deported and exiled to the land of Babylon. This was the bleakest period in Israel’s history. Israel no longer lived in its own land. Its temple had been destroyed; and it appeared that the gods of the Babylonians were stronger than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept,” the Psalmist wrote.

The period of exile was the time of Israel’s greatest challenge. Would Israel continue to believe in God? Would Israel return to the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? It appeared that God’s promises had failed. But suddenly and unexpectedly a prophetic figure appeared and proclaimed the words of comfort we hear in today’s first reading. “Comfort, give comfort to my people . . . speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated.” Israel’s exile ended as suddenly as it began. God who had exiled his people because of their disobedience called his people home. Their guilt had been expiated, and a new chapter began in Israel’s history, a chapter that would culminate in the birth of Jesus, the Messiah.

The Season of Advent is a time of comfort for us as we wait for the coming of Christ in the mystery of Christmas and at the end of the ages. The comfort that God brings this and every Advent Season is the comfort of the gospel—the good news that the kingdom of God has made its appearance in Jesus Christ, the good news that the birth of the Savior has sanctified the world, the good news that the death and resurrection of Christ has overcome the power of Sin and Death that tyrannize our life. Like Israel of old, we need to hear a word of comfort, a word that only God can speak—the Word of comfort that *is* Jesus Christ.

If you haven’t read Isaiah 40, do so this week. It is one of the most beautiful chapters in the whole of scripture, a chapter that inspired Handel’s *Messiah*. Read it slowly and prayerfully and hear the word of comfort God still speaks to us.