

ISAIAH 40:1-11  
EVERY VALLEY...

There are lots of events for which we prepare:

- To go on holiday: you pack your suitcase, dig out your passport and the sun tan lotion; you buy the plane tickets, cancel the milk, lock up the house, put on the alarm, and get someone to take you to airport. Enjoy your holiday!
- A wedding: you make list of things to do and then tick them off and make another list and keep going; you buy the dress, order the cars, find a place to hold the reception, choose the food, arrange the service, find the photographer, decide on the music.
- For a visit of the queen: she thinks the world smells of paint! You put up the bunting, put out the red carpet, decide who will meet her, find a child to present her with a posy of flowers; where is the visitors' book for her to sign, with a page all to herself. Will she need a cup of tea?
- To sit exams: you revise the subjects and get to know the material as well as possible and don't panic; keep a clear head.
- Or at the other end of the school experience, the day on which you go to school for first time: you have a new backpack, a pencil case, school uniform and all you need for school; then you find the courage to face the big, wide world.
- Christmas: well, where do we start? There are cards to write, presents to buy and wrap and send or deliver, and it's especially hard to find something for Auntie Jessie! There is the food to decide on, buy and then prepare; there is church to go to for special events and then the family come round and you have dinner and then fall asleep while watching the Queen or Doctor Who.

There are other things for which we prepare; we take a great deal of time and effort to prepare for these events and sometimes we look back and feel it was worth every minute of that preparation time, even if it was stressful. Other times we look back and feel that we got anxious for no reason at all and swear that there will be a lot less work done for next Christmas!

Isaiah 40 is God preparing for Christmas. Well, sort of! This is at least part of God's preparations for Christmas! Perhaps that's a bit too simplistic, but that is what Isaiah 40 is about. God is preparing the way for the coming of Jesus; God is preparing the people to meet His Son, their Saviour. We know that when Jesus came, some of the people were not always glad to see Him: does that mean that the preparation didn't work very well? Or did it mean that God gave His people the choice to say "yes" or "no" to Jesus? I'll leave you to decide that question for yourself. This is not about cards and presents; this is about what people believed and what kind of people they were, or should be. This preparation is about God trying to get their hearts in the right place for the coming of His Son into the world.

There are three voices in Isaiah 40, all of them unnamed, anonymous voices; they are simply described as "A voice" and they all have a message to bring to the people and the people have to listen. People have to make room to hear. There is an old carol which includes these words: "*oh, hush the noise and still the strife, to hear the angels sing.*" (Hymn 303) We live in a noisy world, with busy lives; there is not much space to be quiet to listen, to stop and ponder; we rush around at breakneck speed from one thing to the next, doing this, that and the other; we need time and space to stop and listen, to hear what God would say to us from His word and by His Spirit. There are three voices, each with something to say that will prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour.

**Voice number 1:** “A voice...” (*Isaiah 40:3ff*) Here’s a question – why is it that the Queen is never held up in traffic? If she were to visit Juniper Green from Holyrood, she would never be held up in traffic at Tollcross or Gillespie crossroads because the police go ahead of her to close off the roads and make sure that all of the traffic is out of the way; hindrances are removed; she will get here and her journey will be much easier than yours or mine! That’s the message of the first voice and more than that: for this king’s coming, even the hills and the valleys will be smoothed over so that the road will be smooth and even, level, and the way clear for the King to come; even in the wilderness there will be a highway along which God can travel. “He will arrive without fail, travel without difficulty and be undelayed by hindrances.” (Motyer) God will come and His glory will be seen in the world. The message of this voice came true when Jesus came. The work of men like Isaiah, men called prophets and last of all, a man like John Baptist, was to prepare the hearts and minds of the people so that when Jesus came their hearts were in a fit state to encounter the Son of God and receive His grace. The message of the first voice: God is coming, be prepared!

**Voice number 2:** “A voice...” (*Isaiah 40:6ff*) What’s the message of Christmas? “A baby is born! Aww! Isn’t that nice!” Everyone smiles and feels warm and happy. Actually, the pre-Christmas message is a bit grittier than that, but nonetheless so important for us to hear. There are two threads to it: the second thread we’re quite happy with; it tells us that God’s word endures for ever; that there is something unchangeable and stable about God’s word to the world; the same love, the same grace, the same Jesus and we love that! But the first thread is a bit less lovely: people are fickle, fragile, transient, unreliable failures! “Grass” is a picture of something that is “here today, gone tomorrow”, passing, and this is what we’re like, left our own devices. It’s not a great message to hear, but if we hear it and take it to heart, it does one good thing – it awakens in us a sense of need, a need that the Bible says, Jesus came to satisfy. The beginning of Mark’s gospel quotes some of these verses from Isaiah 40 and goes on immediately to tell the story of John the Baptist. What was John’s first preaching message to the people? “*Repent*”. People are fickle, fragile, transient, unreliable failures and we need to change and the first step in change is seeing the need in the first place. The message of the second voice: Prepare for God’s coming; see yourself as you really are!

**Voice number 3:** “You who...” (*Isaiah 40:9-11*) “Here is your God”. The message goes out from the hilltop into all the towns and villages – “here is your God”. There are two qualities of God: first of all, see His power; God who has rolled up His sleeves and gone to work on behalf of His people. Secondly God is full of compassion, the shepherd who gently and tenderly carries the weakest and most vulnerable in His arms. God is strong and powerful and God is full of love and compassion. The voice has the job of telling the world about God; not just that God is there and will come into the world, but to tell the people what God is like and how God will bless them. To fickle, fragile people, the voice says “Here is your God; He has come into the world; He is strong enough to save you and He is loving enough to care!”

Isaiah 40 is just one place in the Old Testament where God prepares His people for the coming of Jesus. There are lots of other promises and pictures, inspired by God, to help people understand what was going to take place in days yet to come. We look back on these pieces of the Bible and we see how the jigsaw all fits into place; the voices were right when they spoke about God coming and what He would do in the world. Jesus completes every one of these pictures and we will see more of that next week; God has come into the world just as Isaiah 40 and his three anonymous voices has said. We have two jobs to do as a result: first of all, we need to listen to these words so that our hearts are in the right place, open to receive the blessing of God on

our lives in and through Jesus; secondly, to share this message with the world in which we live.

First of all, we listen! People are fickle, fragile, transient, unreliable failures! “Too much, preacher; that’s far too much; we’re not like that at all!” Really? You might not want to see yourself like that, but would you really say that there’s no truth in this message? I meet so many people who carry around in their hearts a deep sense of failure and guilt because of the mistakes they’ve made and many of them don’t know how to deal with it, where they can go to find peace from it. So it gets hidden, buried somewhere deep inside, untouched, unchanged. It is a counsel of despair if you’re constantly being told that you’re useless and a failure! But we listen to the message that starts there and it starts there for good reason: remember that this is who you are! We might want to deny our faults and failures; “we can be masters of our own destiny; we can sort ourselves out; we can cope with anything!” Remember that you are fragile, fickle and transient. So John the Baptist’s first message is “*repent*”. Hearts in the right place to receive grace are hearts that are humble, that recognise the truth – we are fickle, fragile, failures – but are also hearts that, seeing this need, turn to Jesus for grace. John said “*repent*” and then the next thing he said was, pointing to Jesus one day “*Look, the...*” (*John 1:29*) The despair is lifted; someone has come to save and forgive and His name is Jesus. The humble, penitent heart, the heart ‘on its knees’, is the heart in the right place, open to the grace of Jesus.

Secondly, we share the message. Today, we’re sending out Christmas cards and delivering one to every home in Juniper Green, Baberton Mains and down Lanark Road, our parish, the area of the city for which we have a responsibility in mission. We do this because we want people to know what Christmas is about. Some will read the card, some will come to the events to which we invite them; some will discard it as irrelevant to their lives. We do this because we want to share the message of Christmas – “Here is your God!” – and say something about what God has done and how Jesus is at the heart of Christmas. The challenge for preachers at Christmas is to take the simple message, but find lots of ways of saying it. I had a friend who used to say that “it is more important to say something true at Christmas rather than something new!” It is a simple message: when we tell the story of Jesus, at heart we say to the world “Here is your God!” God has come; the all-powerful, all-compassionate God has come into the world in Jesus.

“*Every valley...*” (*Isaiah 40:4f*) “He will arrive without fail, travel without difficulty and be undelayed by hindrances”. The preparations were made; the way was made ready; the people were made ready to receive their King and to see the glory of God revealed in the world. I wonder if we’re ready to receive grace from God this Christmas? We began the service with these words: “*Make way, make way for Christ the king in splendour arrives; fling wide the gates and welcome Him into your lives.*” Or are we too busy to listen; our lives too cluttered for there to be room for Jesus? Or does pride say “I don’t need Jesus; I can manage my own life; I can sort everything out myself.” We will spend hours, in the next few weeks, preparing for Christmas, getting everything just right; how much time will we spend getting our hearts in the right place to celebrate Jesus? “Here is your God!”