

ISAIAH 40:1-11
A PEOPLE WITH HOPE IN OUR HEARTS!

Hope is a farmer in Rwanda wanting to be sure that his crops will grow and that the price he gets for his beans will help him to feed his family for the year and that the rich countries of the world will treat him fairly, giving him a fair price for his beans. Hope is a mother in Peru who wants her daughter to grow up with more and better opportunities in life, who hopes that giving her an education will open doors for her daughter that were never open for her. Hope is the people of Ukraine being able to celebrate Christmas in peace, with no more fighting, bombing and that families divided by this conflict will be reunited. Hope is millions of people in refugee camps in Lebanon to be free to return home to Syria so that they can rebuild their lives in peace and freedom. Hope is setting up a home, dreaming of a good future, planning, with so many hopes and dreams that one day will come true. Hope is that one day life will be better than it is today.

Hope is part of being human. Hope lives in the human spirit; it can be seen in many shapes and forms; we've only touched the surface with our few examples. Hope is about things being better in some day still to come. Most of us will have a sense of hope in our hearts, even if it is simply about what we plan to do tomorrow and that these plans will work out well. It is part of being human to live with hope in our hearts. When the flame of hope dies, it leaves us in a dark place, a place of despair, where everything is bleak and there seems to be nothing good, nothing bright! Lots of people live there, even if only for a time. Advent is a season of hope: for many people, it is just about the run-up to Christmas, the countdown to "the big day" and presents and dinner and everything else that goes with Christmas. You'll not be surprised when I suggest that Advent is about a bigger hope, hope that is more than that, about a hope that God gives to the world in Jesus; a hope that runs deeper than what is in the big parcel, a hope that goes on beyond December 25th. Let's look at this hope, to see where it comes from, to see where it takes us.

The story begins in the dark! Darkness is dangerous: on Wednesday morning, I went downstairs before I put the light on; we were having a new carpet fitted, and the fitters left the roll at the bottom of the stairs. I knew it was there, but still managed to trip over it in the dark! There was no serious damage, either to the carpet or to me! "People walking in darkness" suggests a people in trouble; people living in the land of deep shadows just emphasises it. Here is a people who had got things wrong, who had made mistakes and had allowed their faults and failings to take over. They had forgotten and neglected their faith. They no longer worshipped God and other things had taken His place. At some stage they would be forced to face up to their faults and failings; they would be taken into exile by their local superpower, forced to live in a foreign land, and some would tell them that this is God's judgement on their sin. It was a dark place indeed, a people living in a land of deep shadows.

"Comfort..." (Isaiah 40:1f) These words strike a totally different tone; these are words of hope and promise; these dark days are in the past and something new and good is about to happen. When George F Handel set out to write his oratorio *The Messiah* these were the words with which he made piece begin; these words from Isaiah 40 are the first words in his musical version of the story of the Messiah; it really is not a bad place to begin. In Isaiah 40:1-11 there are three anonymous voices, in verses 3,6 and 9, all crying out, voices with a message of hope for the world.

Here's the first of these voices; it calls out: *"In the desert..." (Isaiah 40:3f)* A great King is coming and the herald goes in front to warn the people. We struggle to understand this now, because our royal family is in the public eye so much, more perhaps than they want at times, but there was a day when people in Britain didn't

know what the king or queen looked like. On a royal progress through the country, the herald would go in advance to warn people that the king is coming, so that there would be a crowd to greet them, to make them feel popular. Isaiah pictures God coming and that the road would be straight, and the people would be prepared for Him when He comes; He comes to reveal the glory of the Lord to His people. For people who considered that God had gone away and left them to suffer in darkness, this was a promise of immense hope. God is coming; be ready to meet Him. The road is straight and flat and smooth so "the Lord will arrive without fail, will travel without difficulty and be undelayed by hindrances." (Motyer)

The second voice strikes a different chord. Life is fragile, frail and fickle! "*All men...*" (Isaiah 40:6) "Preacher, we know that only too well; you don't need to tell us!" But for some people that's all they know. Life is fragile, fickle and frail and so it is a counsel of despair, but the voice goes on: "*the grass...*" (Isaiah 40:8) There is something sure, a reality that is unchanging, lasting, that never fades away, that never disappoints - God's word, God's promises stand for ever. Jesus is the Word, the living Word, the Word made flesh; Jesus is same yesterday, today, forever. There is something unchangingly stable when we understand that Jesus lives and loves us in all the circumstances of our lives.

The third voice is of someone who stands on a high mountain and shouts; what does he shout? "*Here is...*" (Isaiah 40:9f) The One coming is God Himself, God who is Lord of heaven and earth, God who is full of power and strength; God full of care and compassion, the shepherd who cares for his flock, who carries them close to His heart and leads them gently. "Here is your God!" This is the game-changer: God is coming to His people; the third voice pulls all of these messages together and now they all make sense. Hope, salvation, and forgiveness for the world are centred in the hope that God will come to the world and will bless the world in so many good ways.

There is a profound sense in which these three voices touch a deep nerve in human nature. Hope is something that is part of being human and we've described some of that earlier. For lots of people that hope begins and ends with what will happen tomorrow and will their life be a better thing tomorrow than it is today? Can I make my life better? The Bible's sense of hope takes us both deeper and higher. It takes us deeper because it touches much more than the events of my life; it touches the very deepest parts of our human nature, going to the very heart of what shapes our lives, our attitudes, our relationships. This hope takes us higher because it lifts our eyes to see something more than a life walking the earth, to what we call heaven, to an eternal hope, a hope of glory. There is something in us that resonates with these words; and something in these words that rings bells in us.

When Mark set out to tell his story of Jesus in his gospel, he had the same insight as Handel; Mark began his story of the Messiah in Isaiah 40 as well, with the story of someone who would come, a messenger, a voice. "*So John...*" (Mark 1:4) This is the next chapter in the story, God preparing His people for the coming of the Messiah and Mark's description of John's ministry shows us what they needed. "Repentance" is all about change, a change of direction, a change in the way we think. We are a people living in land of shadows and some of these shadows are self-inflicted; we bring them on ourselves by our sin and waywardness, the dark side of human nature running unchecked. Repentance is change of mind and heart that opens the door for light to come in; a change of mind that asks what God wants; a change of mind that hears news of forgiveness; a change of mind that makes it possible for the land of deep shadows to become the land of light, blessing, grace, peace, joy and hope. Advent is about coming of light into the darkness; the symbolism is powerful; this is the coming of Jesus.

Even that is not the end of the story, because hope in the Bible takes us another step, another higher step. We use the word 'hope' to suggest what might be; we hope it will happen, but there is something uncertain. When the Bible uses the word 'hope' it is yet to be, but there is nothing uncertain about it. The Bible's hope is something yet to be, but it is sure and certain. *"If we..." (Rom 8:17)* This is the hope of heaven; the hope that we will share in Jesus' glory. Jesus has gone back to heaven, and has taken up again the glory that He left behind to come to Bethlehem. The promise is that we will share His glory with Him, that we will be with Him one day and will share His glory. This is so often the silent twin of Advent, that not only did Jesus come once to save the world, but He will come again as a great King trailing clouds of glory and when He does there will be a new heaven and new earth and the glory of the Lord will fill the earth for all to see. Jesus has promised and these will happen; they are yet to be, but this is a sure and certain hope in Jesus.

The first time I was in Cambodia, I met a project worker in a village outside Phnom Penh. He was working with a Christian organisation whose aim was to make life better for the people of that village. They organised a rice bank so that villagers had a reliable supply of food; they helped people deal with the money lenders, and in other ways too. But his first job, he said, was to help people 'think better'. Hope was a quality in short supply in that village, as it is in Cambodia and as it still is in many rural communities in the world which are poor. His 'thinking better' was about giving people hope when before all they knew was despair; his 'thinking better' was about introducing these people to Jesus, because he knew that only Christian faith could really, fully and finally break the deepest chains that bound their hearts and minds. Only Jesus can turn the despair that grips the human soul into a hope that lasts forever. His 'thinking better' got deep inside that village!

God is able... that's where our hope comes from. Three voices in Isaiah 40 declared: prepare the way for the Lord; God's word is unchangeably reliable; "Here is your God!" Three voices brought hope to a people who were living in the land of deep shadows. There are deep shadows across our land: God is ignored, faith is neglected, people do their own thing. Deep shadows touch our hearts: sin, failure, hurt, despair. Advent repeats these stories of hope: God is coming in Jesus; the light of the world is appearing; Jesus brings grace, peace, and forgiveness to the world and so He brings hope. The challenge for us is to think better: look to Jesus; focus our eyes on Him; let Jesus be the centre of Advent and Christmas; make it a time to renew our faith, a time, yes, for repentance and to open a door to let light into our hearts. This is where our hope lies; it is a sure and certain hope; it is a hope that lasts forever.