

*Comfort, O comfort my people.* These words open not just a new chapter in the book of the prophet Isaiah, but what is effectively part 2 of the work. And they introduce a new prophetic voice, with a call to deliver a new message to God's people, beginning a new chapter in Israel's history. Isaiah of Jerusalem, the prophet associated with part 1 of the book, spoke of the imminent downfall of the kingdom of Judah. But now time has moved on; this new, anonymous figure is a prophet to God's people in exile. He is to call them from enduring the present, in an alien culture, to embracing the future: in particular, to conceive of a return to their homeland.

Maybe that sounds like an easy sell. But was it? Nearly 50 years had passed: we'd be talking about 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation exiles; who'd never known anything but life in Babylon; who spoke its language and were perhaps accustomed to its ways. And then there was the sheer unlikelihood: how could it come about, against the will of the Babylonians – and their gods?

One of the striking things about the God of Israel in these opening verses is that tenderness and strength go hand in hand. Our instinct may be to put these qualities in different boxes: possibly gendered boxes, with masculine strength and feminine tenderness; assuming that one or the other will predominate. But consider professional carers like Florence Nightingale and Edith Cavell and we have to acknowledge their strength. While strong, powerful people may well have a tender side, whether expressed in private family life, or public philanthropy. In the case of the God of Israel, the image of a conquering champion, returning to Jerusalem *in might*, merges into that of a shepherd, *gently leading the mother sheep*, while *gathering the lambs in his arms*. None are to be left behind in this homecoming. And that demands sensitivity from the outset: the prophet is to *speak tenderly* to those scarred by the experience of exile. Yet for the sceptical and those Babylon had seduced, this God also possesses the power which makes change possible: confronted with his breath, human achievements wither; while his advance demands the levelling of mountains and the filling of valleys.

The advent of vaccines heralds the end of our Coronavirus exile – even though there's a way to go yet. I wonder what that will be like? A sudden end to restrictions, or a lingering winding down? An eruption of partying? Or a counting of the cost? Although we're talking about a year, rather than generations, how long before some of us lose our instinctive aversion to proximity and handling, or the recurrent desire to sanitize? As we move from enduring the present to embracing the future, I'm sure that our divine shepherd's sensitivity will be valuable, together with his desire not to leave any behind: the virus will leave scars: on lungs and lives and livelihoods. The economy, the high street, dementia sufferers will not be what they were. Yet there will also be the power to change things: to choose not to return to the old ways, to grasp new opportunities.

The words *Comfort ye* also open Handel's *Messiah*. Today, in Advent, the passage is linked with John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. As Christians, even though enduring the present sometimes appears to be all that is available to us, we always have a future to embrace. Jesus called it the kingdom of God. Rather than requiring a return to a physical homeland, it is a realm we are continually invited to enter and to bring others with us. It is here and hereafter; among us and before us; and Jesus taught us to pray daily for its coming. That is both a comfort and a strength.

Thanks be to God.