

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

Theme: Comfort, Comfort My People

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Healing & Anointing Service on 31/01/2016 at 10.30am

Certainly, there are countless stories in the Old Testament that remind us of God's unwavering care for God's people. There is also Jesus at the centre of each of the gospels; Jesus who walks through Galilee for three years, bringing with him the healing balm of touch, curing broken bodies and spirits alike with the gentle words of a good shepherd.

As I began to plan today's service, I found my imagination wandering across three realms of thought. First, I thought about the many struggles which people in our small church and in our community itself face: Struggles against illness and physical pain. Interactions with a convoluted and confusing medical system. Families broken by heartache and misunderstanding. Death, often too soon and never really expected, and the grief and sadness and dislocations that follow.

And finally, I thought about a passage from Isaiah 40.

The prophet Isaiah, spoke 2,500 hundred years ago to a people in exile - a people sent to Babylon, far from home, far from all that was familiar and loved. These are the people from which come the words of the first verse of **Psalm 137: "By the waters of Babylon – there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion"**.

And isn't that how we often feel: that as a consequence of loss or illness, brokenness or grief, we live as exiles, cut off from all that is familiar, all that we long for? When we walk the halls of an unfamiliar hospital, do we not feel ourselves to be women and men in exile, far from home? When our family has disintegrated, do we not want to sit down and weep when we remember what was? The words of the prophet and the psalmist so often ring true for us.

And **what do we want? We want healing and wholeness, of course, but what do we mean by those words?**

We mean that we want to be restored, or we want our loved ones to be restored to us, just as we were or just as they were. We want the kinds of miracles that Jesus performs: the blind see, the lame walk, the mentally ill gain clarity, the dead rise. We want healing and wholeness in terms which we understand. And we want them right now.

But the Bible promises something different, something concealed in a cloud of mystery. **The Bible offers us hope in a future we cannot see, and it offers us the strength to await its coming.**

Listen to the prophet Isaiah: "Comfort, O comfort, my people," The prefix com –means with. And the word fort -- means strength. Like forte, in music: strong and powerful. Like the common word we know, fort – a place of strength and power in defense. **"Comfort my people" - give my people strength.**

We have watered that word, comfort, down. We tend to think of comfort as something reassuring, something soft and relaxing. Nothing wrong with that – nothing wrong with a comforting song, or a comfortable chair. But that's not where Isaiah stops. **Isaiah offers the promise of strength in exile, strength in dislocation.**

Isaiah tells us that yes, things change (v.6); - we are like grass, and the grass withers and fades - but the word of God stands forever. And what does God, through God's word, do? God stands firm and rearranges everything else. Listen to this passage:

(Verse 4) Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain." God changes the topography! God moves the very earth around. The world as we know it will be transformed; the events and experiences that cause us so much pain – they will be changed. And this is the news that comforts us; this is the news that gives us strength.

Can we see and understand such a thing here, in this world where, as Paul says, we see only through a glass darkly?

When we begin to grasp that there is another vision for us, another hope for us, when we begin to peer into God's hope-filled future, perhaps we see that even in our present travails, we are invited into an experience of wholeness and healing

We may not evade the cancer or the surgery that await us. We may not be able to alleviate confusion, bewilderment, grief. Not at all. Not by our own efforts, according to our own standards.

But God has ways that are not ours, and standards of measurement that are not ours. Perhaps when we pray for healing and wholeness, we need to remember that while we pray, of course, for healing and wholeness as we understand those words, we are also praying to be receptive to God's understanding of those words.

We pray, naturally and hopefully, because God has invited us to do so; we pray that a loved one recover from injury or illness, be made whole again, return to life as it was. But within that prayer might be a deeper one: a prayer that someone be made whole in an unexpected way, perhaps by reaching out to others and accompanying them on a similar journey.

We pray for financial recovery in this time of economic downslide; we pray for energy and resources for caregivers, we pray that the grieving and hopeless be released from the emotions that trap and limit them. But within those prayers might be deeper ones: prayers for a return to God, prayers that those who are burdened turn to Jesus and his friendship, prayers for a deeper trust and confidence in the God who invites us into God's fold, who gathers us like sheep in anticipation of the new heaven and the new earth, places in which all will be made whole.

And so, when you come forward to pray in a few minutes, breathe in deeply the presence of the God who longs to heal you and your loved ones, whose greatest desire is for human restoration and wholeness. Breathe in deeply the presence and movement of the God whose ways are not our ways, and who may be strengthening us for journeys we would not choose, inviting us into places we do not want to go, and healing us in ways that we do not seek. Open your hearts to the God who makes all things new, and place your prayerful confidence in the one whose word stands forever.