

Isaiah 40:1-11; 2

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them.

Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Peter 3:8-15

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.^[a]

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.^[b] That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

¹⁴ So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. ¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,^[a] the Son of God,^[b] ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—

³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with^[c] water, but he will baptize you with^[d] the Holy Spirit."

In our household we do like time travel stories. 'Back to the Future' was a hit with me when I was 11 and is a hit with my children. We are a bit obsessed with Doctor Who, and Inigo and I have been writing a time-travel story when we get the chance.

But another wonderful time travel story is the third Harry Potter story — the Prisoner of Azkaban. At the climax of the story Harry has to achieve the impossible, and to do it Professor Dumbledore lends him a 'time-turner', a magical pendant that allows him to go back in time. He can be in two places at once. Pursuing the answers to the mystery, and chased by the fearful dementors through the forest Harry sees someone who looks like his dad in the half light, and this person casts the perfect patronus spell — a glorious bright stag that shines in the darkness and dispels all the evil around him. It is a spell that Harry has struggled to cast all year. Later, when Harry has used his time-turner to go back to the same hour he finds himself on the other side of the lake. Here are the dementors... he must dispel their darkness and evil, he must use the spell he never could get right — but can he? And then he realises that had seen not his dad but *himself* casting that spell — and with the confidence of *having seen his success* he casts the most magnificent patronus spell, and the dementors fly. There is light in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out. There is the assurance of victory that gives hope and strength to all his actions. Victory is his.

This is how the Christian year works — though our story through history is linear the cycle of the year means that we fold the past back over the future, and as we recall the anticipation of Jesus's birth, we also look forward to his return, and Advent celebrates both, with the assurance that the first coming guarantees the second. We look back to look forward with the assurance of victory that gives hope and strength to *our* actions. Victory belongs to God, and to his people, of whom we are a part.

Peter's second letter talks with real anticipation of Jesus's return. I mentioned last week that when Jesus talks of the son of man returning in the clouds in glory that he has changed his tone. Here Peter does the same: he speaks with a different accent and dialect, which needs to be heard in that different way. Both Jesus in Mark 13 and Peter here in 2 Peter are putting on the voice of 'apocalyptic', a style of prophetic speaking that you are most familiar with through Revelation. It is not literal, but figurative, full of powerful images, because this is putting into language world-changing things beyond our comprehension. When Peter says, 'The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare,' — he *really doesn't mean this literally*. He is evoking the same imagery as Jesus did on the Mount of Olives — images of skies melting and the earth burning to signify huge change, especially politically. The destructive imagery *is* supposed to cause apprehension — woe to you if you are content with the evil and injustice of the world because it benefits you!

If you still have problems with the difficulty of the language, remember that Jesus is actually a really nice guy whom Peter knew better than anyone, and pay attention to *this* verse, which is key to the whole passage:

'You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.'

So we are supposed to look forward to the day of the Lord, and to speed its coming. This is because God's rule is good and brings peace, love and justice. Therefore, we live holy and godly lives — anticipating this day, and speeding it's coming.

So this passage of 2 Peter is really not about fear but hope. Our reading from Isaiah is also about hope — Isaiah interleaves carrot and stick throughout a long book of prophecy, but in Isaiah 40 we really hit hopefulness in its brightest, clearest form. Comfort! Make a way for the Lord, the Lord is coming! When the Lord comes, he will sort out everything! It's a reading we are quite familiar with from carol services, and not less wonderful for it.

Isaiah shines a light of hope in the darkness. The Lord has not forgotten you, he is coming. Peter's world is no less dark than Isaiah's in most respects except for one thing — The Lord has come, has revealed his glory through love, and preaching and healing and the compassion of the cross and the grace of the resurrection, and has promised to return. Like Harry Potter's amazing darkness-dispelling magic we can hope with utter confidence because it's kind of already happened. We have seen the future and Christ wins against all the darkness.

In the darkness of winter and war and the cost of living we still have hope — a light in the darkness. Advent and the anticipation of Christmas reminds us that the light shone in the darkness, and that the light is coming again, fully, permanently, a point at which the victory of God is completed. All we must do is live holy and godly lives, as we look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

Amen.

Christmas Carol Service

Sunday 17th December 5pm

Come and Celebrate this special time of the year

Everyone is Welcome

St Peter's Church Westleton

