

## **Isaiah 40, 1 - 11: The Voice Of God**

Today's text will be from the book of Isaiah, from the beginning of chapter 40. I'll shortly give you a bit of a context, because I don't know, who of you know this book. It actually consists of two main parts, the first part are the chapters 1-39 and the second part are the chapters 40-66. We are right at the start of the second part and Isaiah writes here to a devastated people. He writes to Israel, and he speaks to them in a difficult situation: they had no country on their own, their capital Jerusalem had been destroyed and their whole country had been conquered by the Babylonians. In fact most of them had been led to Babylon and had to live and serve there, far away from their homes. To sum it up: they had not much hope for their future.

But in this situation of despair, God speaks through Isaiah, and the messages he has for them reveal his glory and comfort his people. I don't know, what situation you are in, but God wants to speak to you today. No matter if you need comfort or feel all well, he wants to reveal himself to you. So let's read the text.

### **Isaiah 40, 1 - 11:**

1 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 desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness 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 mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

6 A voice says, Cry out. And I said, What shall I cry? All men are like grass, and all their glory 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 stands for ever.

9 You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings 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 his arm rules for him. 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.

God speaks here through Isaiah and there are four different things he says. In order to understand what they meant and what they still mean for us today, we are going to look at each of those four messages shortly.

### **1. God says: I forgive**

First we read here that God wants to comfort his people. We read here "says YOUR god", if he is our god, then we belong to him. So if you know that you belong to him and are his, then this message is for you. And what it says to you is this: I forgive.

The people of Israel had sinned against God. Even though they were his people, they had rebelled against him. They had worshiped false idols and they had not listened to the prophets that God had sent. They did not turn around when God called them to. God would

have had every right to destroy them and to leave them alone in their sins and let them die. It was his right, because they had sinned against his glory, they had lived for themselves, and not cared about him in their life, even though they knew that he existed.

Do you see the similarity? Isn't that exactly how your life was before you asked God for forgiveness and accepted him as Lord of your life? Weren't you opposing him as well and would have deserved eternal death? God would have had every right to smash you and me into pieces right away, because we lived for ourselves and totally ignored him or even withstood him. And if we were in his position we would probably crush everyone like small little ants. But God is different. He is not like that. He loves to forgive. That's why he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. That's why I can stand here proclaim to you in the name of the Lord, citing from verse 2: **Your sin has been paid for!** Jesus paid for your sin, that is why God speaks tenderly to you. That is why you and me can belong to his family. That is what should comfort us the most, the fact that we have peace with the one true God.

Just before I said, that this message is for those that belong to God. And it is to the respect that it assures us who belong to him, that our sin has been forgiven. But even if you do not belong to God already, if in your heart you know that you actually still don't know him, this message has something to say to you. Even though you might still oppose God, he already loves you. He opens his arms and tells you that Jesus Christ died for your sin and you can be saved by accepting that forgiveness and subordinating your life under his will and guidance. In **Ezekiel 33, 11** we read: '**As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?**' He takes no pleasure that you live and die without him. Turn to him, so that he can comfort you, turn to him so that he can heal you and forgive you.

## **2. God says: I know the future**

The second message God tells us here is one that points to the future. Let us read again:

**In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.**

In the times of Isaiah, when a king was coming to a place, messengers prepared the way for him. They did this by telling the people to prepare themselves for the king in a worthy manner, and they also did this by repairing broken streets in order to prepare a good path for the king. Here we have no human king that the way should be prepared for, no, God himself is going to come and that leads not only to a few streets being repaired but to whole valleys being lifted up and mountains being torn down. When God arrives everything is moving.

First this was comfort to the people of Israel. They were captives in a foreign land under a foreign king. For their own king no one prepared a way anymore. He was taken captive like everyone else and had to serve the Babylonian king. But God tells them here, that this might be the present, but that it will change in the future. He assures them that he himself will come, and even more, that he will not come unseen but that his glory will be revealed, so that all mankind will see it. What a message! Here are his people, oppressed and persecuted - like so many Christians today all around the world - and because they were in that situation everyone could think that either their God had forsaken them or their God was not powerful enough to guard them. But none of that was true. Even though the present

might not have revealed it to everyone, they still could rely on God being the only one and true God. They could rely on his promises, his power and his love. They could trust in him that he knows the future. That's what should lift them up in that situation, to look away from how big their problems are to how great their God is. And that's what we should do today as well: I don't know where you stand in your life, but God has not changed. He is still there, he is still in control and you can still hold on to him and his promises, because he wants to reveal his glory in and through your life.

Secondly verse 3 here in fact is a prophecy about John, the baptist, that prepared the Jews for the first coming of Jesus. God already planned what was going to happen a few hundred years later, because he has the future in his hand. And part of that future he revealed here to Isiah so that it would comfort his people. And this message was not only a comfort back then but it is also a comfort today: Jesus is coming! He is coming to everyone of us and wants to enter our lives. He lifts up those with broken hearts like the valleys that should be raised and he brings down those with pride, who think they are on a mountain where they can look on everyone from above. His intent is not to make us all look the same, but to make us equal so that we can be one in him. **Galatians 3,28** says: **"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."** That is how God himself prepares a church that is worthy to be associated with the living God.

And Isiah also says here that the glory of God will be revealed and in fact God never revealed himself and his glory more than through Jesus Christ. He died for our sins and was resurrected and has been given all power in heaven and on earth. Just like that God's glory is revealed today when people get to know Jesus and realize what God himself has already done for them and accept him as their Lord and saviour and devote their lives to him. And as God reveals his glory to mankind today through his church, so that a lot of people already see it all around the world, there will also be a day in the future when it will be inevitable to confess that Jesus is Lord. He himself will come again, visible to everyone and then all men together will see his glory. God promised it and as he has the future is in his hand, we can trust in this promise.

### **3. God says: My word will endure**

The third message that is given to us, also promises us something. It promises that God's word will endure.

Last week has been pretty warm outside. It's January still, but it almost feels like spring is starting already. Birds are singing, one can play football outside again - maybe not as important to everyone as it is to me - and: flowers and grass are already starting to grow here and there. Isn't it marvellous that God lets grow grass and flowers even in places, where no human will ever see it? Just for this delight and his glory, like on a mountain where no one will ever walk. I mean maybe one year someone will walk there, but such grass only is there for a year and in the next year new grass and new flowers grow. It's there only for a year. I want to read again:

**"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever."**

You might live a little longer than a year, but compared to the history of mankind and compared to the eternity of God, your life is no longer than a day. And this is true for everyone of us. No matter if you are a successful business man, an ordinary working class person, a celebrity or a poor homeless. Even those that conquered the whole known world,

like Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar, even they are like grass before the Lord. One blow and you are gone, one last breath and your life is over. All your glory, everything that you have achieved and done in life, all your friends and family, nothing of that you can take with you. In that final moments of your life, there is only one thing that endures. There is only one person that has gone this road and came back: God himself. He is still there and when nothing else matters anymore, he still is there. If you belong to him, if you are his child, you can trust in him even then, that he will bring to an end what he started in your life the day you accepted him as your Lord. Back then he transformed you and you were born by the spirit of God and at the day you die, you will be transformed again and leave your earthly body to be glorified with him.

That is the personal view, but there is also a global view: kings come and go, nations rise and fall, but the word of God remains. The gospel is the truth and it has power to save the lost and transform people today as it had 100 or 500 or 2000 years ago. Let us trust in that word of God, let us trust in Jesus Christ, for he is God's word becoming flesh, as John puts it. Let us trust that he is the answer. "Jesus is the answer for the world today" is the title of a Christian song and I want to add that he is the only answer. When we meet people, when we see problems, when we are confronted with misery, Jesus is the answer. It makes no sense to want unredeemed people to live redeemed lives. First of all, they need forgiveness and redemption and then a new life is born and afterwards circumstances and lives can and will change.

And when talk to non-believers, when we try to convince them that there is a God, when we want to explain our faith to them, let us trust that there is power in the word of God and that it will accomplish what it promises to do. Let us not be ashamed of this word and try to make it fit our needs. Let us not explain away it's sharpness and not disregard its love. When people read the bible, when they hear or read a sermon full with god's word, they will encounter the living God and he will reveal himself to them. It's not our methods that endure, it's not our creativity that endures, it's not our style of worship that endures, it is his word that endures. In a few years we all will be history but God's word will remain and will still move, and will still draw, and will still save. Let us therefore read it, let us learn it, let us listen to it, and let us put our trust in it.

#### **4. God says: I enable you**

I don't know how many of us know our church vision statement by heart, but if you visit for example our web-page you will read: "Praising God - enabling people". The fourth and last message that Isiah delivers does the second: it enables people.

**See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 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.**

Isiah describes here first that God is able. He says the God is sovereign and that he comes with power and that he rules. When Isiah had been called by God earlier in his life - you can read that in chapter 6 - , he had seen the Lord sitting in all his glory on his eternal throne and been scared to death. He had thought that he was going to die. But he wasn't dying because God cleansed him and called him into his service. Now, years after that, I think Isiah still remembers all too good what it looked like and how it felt like. When God speaks through him here, I think he thought again about that life-changing moment and all the glory that had been shown to him. But do you realize how his attitude had changed? I think he still shivers at the memory of his past, but now he knows God better than back then: He says that that same arm, that rules the world, is used to carry those that belong to him

close to his heart. He says that that same God that comes with power so that nothing can withstand him, also comes with gentle love and gathers us around him and leads us, because we would be helpless without him.

God delights in you, because you are his reward, that accompanies him. The sovereign God, he who does not depend on any human being worshipping him, he that has all the power, he delights in you, because he loves you. In **Jeremiah 29, 11** we read: "**For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.**" That is what enables me - to know that God loves me. What does it enable me for? To spread out the gospel, the good tidings:

**You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings 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!**

We are those that have good tidings to bring. Our Zion is not Jerusalem but the place where God put us. Some of us will go back to different parts of this world and bring that good message there, some of us will stay here and spread it in Linz. Let us not be ashamed and let us not be afraid, for God is with us. Let us but stand visible like on a high mountain and lift up our voices and our lives so that they shout to those around us that God is here. That he is real and serious but that he comes with open arms and invites us to come to him. And God is here tonight as well, in our midst, let us realize that when we stand here and worship him, that he, the living God, is in our midst.

Amen.