

The background of the cover is an abstract painting. It features a dense composition of colors including bright yellow, orange, red, green, and purple. The brushstrokes are expressive and varied, with some being thin and delicate, while others are thick and bold. There are also some black scribbles and lines scattered throughout the composition. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional intensity.

Comfortable Words

a call to restoration

Reflections on Isaiah 40–55

Steven Croft

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

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Reflections on Isaiah 40–55



*To the clergy, lay ministers, church wardens and volunteers
of the Diocese of Oxford,
for your outstanding and inspiring service over the past year.*

Contents

Introduction	9
1 Comfort, O comfort my people	12
Isaiah 40:1-11	
2 Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength.....	20
Isaiah 40:18-31	
3 Do not be afraid	28
Isaiah 41:8-13	
4 Servant leadership.....	38
Isaiah 42:1-9	
5 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you	46
Isaiah 43:1-7	
6 Will you come and follow me?	55
Isaiah 49:1-6	
7 A word for the weary.....	63
Isaiah 50:4-9	
8 Lamb of God.....	72
Isaiah 52:13—53:12	
9 Come to the waters.....	82
Isaiah 55	
And finally.....	91

Introduction

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the country went into lockdown, I spent some time thinking about how best to sustain the church across the diocese in the coming months. No one knew, of course, how long the pandemic would last or what the effects would be in those early weeks.

By the grace of God, I made two early decisions with colleagues which proved helpful. The first was to develop an online service for the Diocese of Oxford every Sunday to support local churches who were already moving online. The second was to begin, tentatively, a regular podcast reflection on a passage of scripture. The podcast was aimed primarily at supporting and sustaining clergy and lay leaders of all kinds as we made this journey together.

The lockdown began on 23 March. Between May and July, I paid virtual visits to all 29 deaneries and met online with between 500 and 600 clergy and lay leaders. Each conversation was deeply moving. There was a tremendous outpouring of energy, creativity and love and the deep renewal of pastoral ministry which, taken together, was one of the most remarkable moves of God I have ever seen. But there were also signs that people were indeed carrying heavy burdens in their own lives, in their families, in their churches and in the wider community. That experience of listening also fed into the writing and delivery of the weekly podcast.

At the centre of the calling of a priest (and a bishop) is the service of the word and the prayers (to use the language of Acts 6). For much of the past year, apart from a short period in September and October, I was unable to

keep to my normal pattern of preaching and leading worship in churches across the diocese. I tried to use that time to reflect at depth on a particular passage of scripture and to share it through the podcast.

The first series of reflections was on the Psalms, exploring themes of lament and suffering in particular.

The second was on Philippians, taking us deeper into what it means to be a church patterned on the character of Christ. Those reflections formed the core of a new study guide for churches, published in September.

The third series of podcasts took the songs of the unknown prophet of Isaiah 40–55, the voice crying in the wilderness, as its theme. This prophet sings at the end of the exile in Babylon, to call the people back to God, to give them strength again and to prepare the exiles for the work of rebuilding that would come. The songs are a deep well from which we can drink as a church in this most demanding of seasons.

I originally wrote and delivered one each week between September and the end of November 2020. At the beginning, churches were able to meet together physically, but most also continued to offer online as well as in-person worship. By the end of the series, we had walked through the second lockdown and looked forward to emerging gradually into a very different Advent and Christmas season.

The prophet's themes are powerful and relevant to the journey through Covid-19 and beyond. There are songs of great comfort and consolation; songs about leadership, especially the leadership of God's people; songs about facing difficulty and danger; and songs of purpose and about our calling and the rhythm of our discipleship.

The book of Isaiah isn't always easy to read, but it repays deep and careful study, as I have found over many years. As you work your way through these reflections, have the text open and listen carefully to the prophet's songs.

The songs will be relevant to the life of the church for many months to come, as we emerge from the lockdown period in both church and society and have the opportunity to reset and rebuild for the future. I'm grateful therefore to BRF for agreeing to publish these Comfortable Words in time to be a resource to a wider audience.

I want to thank very warmly indeed Steven Buckley, who produced the podcasts each week amid everything else he had to do. I also want to thank my senior colleagues in the diocese and my immediate team of Marian Green, Paul Cowan, Simon Cross and Sharon Appleton, who helped to create the time and space for this kind of writing and reflection (and so much else). Thanks as well to everyone who took the trouble to encourage me on this journey.

Most of all, I want to thank the clergy, lay ministers, church wardens, church officers and volunteers of the Diocese of Oxford, who, quite simply, have been outstanding and inspiring in churches, chaplaincies, schools and the wider community over this past year.

May God continue to be with us and to guide us all in the vital work of rebuilding to which we are now called.

Steven Croft, Oxford
Advent 2020



Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength

– Isaiah 40:18–31 –

This is the world we live in. We live in a vulnerable world. One of the ways we deal with it is that we numb vulnerability. I think there's evidence – it's not the reason this evidence exists but it's a huge cause – we are the most in-debt, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in US history.

Those words are by Brené Brown, the American researcher and author, speaking in 2010 in what has become one of the most-viewed TED talks of all time, 'The power of vulnerability' ([ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability)). If you've not seen it, take 20 minutes to watch it.

Brown is attempting to describe the way the world around us has learned to respond to suffering, pain and difficulty. The temptation is to numb all of this negative emotion, to overlay it, to disguise it through shopping, social media, food, alcohol or other addictive behaviours. We numb.

In normal times that can set in motion slow but destructive cycles of behaviour in our lives. We keep afloat, but only just. In times of crisis and difficulty, however, it is not enough to numb. The pain around us overwhelms our defences. Something much deeper is needed.

By the rivers of Babylon, 2,500 years ago, there was a prophet who called himself – or herself – a voice crying in the wilderness, a prophet without a name. The call of this prophet is to bring comfort to the people of Israel, in exile far from home. The songs of the prophet have been passed down to us in 16 beautiful chapters of the book of Isaiah, chapters 40–55.

The prophet is called to bring comfort. That call to comfort gives us the opening line of the first song. But this was comfort with a purpose. The prophet's aim – and the Lord's aim – is not simply to soothe the exiles and dry their tears, though the songs are songs of great tenderness and hope. The people of God are downcast and defeated by three generations of exile.

The prophet's vision, however, is much bigger. It is to regather the people of God, to help them, first of all, to stand again, to give them strength and purpose and to remind them of who they are. And then it is to put courage, fight, faith and joy back into their hearts.

God is leading the exiles home again to Jerusalem, to rebuild the nation and the temple. That will soon become possible for the first time in 70 years. But will they choose to go? How many will make the journey? To make that great return they will need all their strength again. The exiles must therefore be recalled to God and to their faith, must find their strength and hope if they are to stand, return and rebuild.

These exiles have spent two generations in Babylon. They have experienced hardship, but also all kinds of pleasures and temptations. All around them are the temples of the gods of Babylon, the idols, projections of human

ideas and power. The worship of the idols is designed exactly to numb the exiles, to help them forget the living God, to seduce them into merging with the population around them. If they had done so, the entire history of the world would have been so very different.

So our prophet sings to call them back, to remind them of a better way. The songs are not telling the exiles anything new. This is recall and remembering, not new information.

We are recalled first to the beauty and majesty of God in creation:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,
and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance.

ISAIAH 40:12

The God of Israel is not one god among many, as it must have seemed to the exiles amid the temples of Babylon. The God of Israel is God Almighty, the maker of the heavens and the earth, the only God. The whole beauty, order and majesty of creation tells us that God has wisdom, skill and power beyond our comprehension.

The God of Israel is not a god manufactured or invented by humans, crafted from wood by a carpenter and decorated by a goldsmith.

To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?

An idol? – A workman casts it
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,
and casts for it silver chains.

ISAIAH 40:18–19

When we pursue idols, we are pursuing gods made with human hands,
limited by our own imagination, who cannot lead us home.

True purpose, meaning and strength do not lie in this direction, sings the
voice. For there is an older, deeper story. You have heard it in your youth.
Your deepest being longs for this song to be true. Listen to the call:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in.

ISAIAH 40:21–22

God the creator is real and strong and calling out to God's people to stand
and rebuild.

How will God's people respond? Will we hide away, turn inwards, full of our
fear, misery and resentment?

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?

ISAIAH 40:27

Again the prophet recalls us:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God...

This time the prophet uses the personal name of God, the name revealed to Moses, the name his people will not pronounce. The God of Israel is the one true Almighty God, the maker of heaven and earth.

The Lord is the everlasting God
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
ISAIAH 40:28

The exiles may feel small and forgotten. They may be worn down by life's hardships and distracted by the temptations around them. They may be burdened by their own weakness and the sin of their nation. They may feel they have fallen, never to rise again.

But the prophet's song fills their hearts and minds with a vision of God who is deeper and greater, a God beyond time and the universe, a prime mover and a sustainer, a God of majesty and power, way beyond the game of thrones and clash of empires in which their lives are trapped. This God is calling them.

The prophet moves to the song's ending:

He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

ISAIAH 40:29–31

Which way will we turn, I wonder, in this time and season as we continue to walk through all of the confusion and pain around us? We need to recognise our own history. For every generation for the past 70 years, the tide of faith has gone out a little further. Each generation has inherited fewer and fewer resources from our Christian heritage for coping with grief, pain and difficulty. It has come as a deep shock to some younger generations in the pandemic that things can go so badly wrong so quickly. As Christians we can be caught up in the spirit of the age. We can forget the strength, resilience and life that come from our faith and ultimately from God. We need to be recalled.

‘Have you not known. Have you not heard,’ the prophet says to us.

Much of the society around us does not know what to do with pain and difficulty, even in normal times. We try to deaden our emotions, to numb, to use Brené Brown’s words. Here is the quotation again, with slightly more included this time:

This is the world we live in. We live in a vulnerable world. One of the ways we deal with it is that we numb vulnerability. I think there’s evidence – it’s not the reason this evidence exists but it’s a huge cause – we are the most in debt, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in US history.

The problem is – and I learned this from the research – you cannot selectively numb emotion. You cannot say, ‘Here’s the bad stuff: here’s vulnerability, here’s grief, here’s shame, here’s disappointment.

I don't want to feel these. I'm going to have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. I don't want to feel these'... You can't select those. So when we numb those we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. Then we are miserable, and we are looking for purpose and meaning and we feel vulnerable. So then we have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin – and it becomes this dangerous cycle.

The prophet of Isaiah 40 encourages us not to numb but to acknowledge pain, difficulty and suffering and then, still, to open our hearts to God's love, healing and strength. In God's light and love we are given the strength to face the pain and questions because of this greater and deeper reality and hope and love. This is what it means to wait on the Lord. This waiting is more than taking time to say our prayers, though time is certainly involved. It is time to listen to the pain and difficulty within us and the world around us and to open that pain to God's grace and healing.

In Isaiah 40 we are to open our hearts to the Lord first through the beauty and majesty of the creation. The size, beauty and majesty of the universe point us, if we will look, to the God of order, beauty and purpose. This world did not come about by chance or accident. Our longing for something beyond ourselves, for love and meaning, would be the strangest product of random evolution, but it makes absolute sense if, as scripture tells us, we were made to acknowledge and to know our maker.

As Christians we are called to ponder the mystery of God in the book of creation, to be recalled to our insignificance but also to the wonder that God cares for and loves us as individuals.

But we are also called to ponder the mystery of God as revealed in scripture and, most of all, in Jesus, God's Son. Our prophet will thread references to the word of God through almost every song. The prophet goes on to sing

of the servant of the Lord who will come and show us more of God's nature and bring healing through his own suffering, as we will see.

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.

Many of us find it hard to be still, to have an empty day or a couple of hours when we are not sure what to do. We are restless. One of the reasons for our restlessness is that when we stop, when we allow space, all of the pain and questions rise to the surface.

Our society needs more space and time for this, not less. Carrying so much pain and turmoil within is exhausting. We need the courage to stop, to listen, to be ourselves, to sit for a while and to find those moments of renewal when we hear God speak.

That can happen in our prayers, in our worship, in the silence of our empty churches, in the sunshine. I went for a bike ride on a Saturday morning down the canal path towards Oxford. By the side of the path, I passed a woman sitting cross-legged on the ground, her face turned towards the sun. I've no idea, of course, what was happening inside her. But it seemed to me that here was someone who was waiting on the Lord to renew her strength, who was recognising all that was happening, who was seeking that grace and strength from God to rise up and rebuild.

Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.



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‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...’

Through nine reflections, Steven Croft examines what these ‘comfortable words’ have to say to us. Each reflection begins from a passage of scripture taken from Isaiah 40—55: the song of an unnamed prophet who sings at the end of the exile to call God’s people home.

The prophet sings of love and forgiveness and of new hope and strength in God, to rekindle courage in the hearts of God’s people. The prophet sings of a new kind of leadership based on humility and gentleness. The prophet sings of not being afraid, even in the face of death. These are comfortable words the whole world needs to hear afresh in this season.



The Rt Revd Dr Steven Croft is the Bishop of Oxford. He has a passion for mission and evangelism and for finding creative ways of sharing the gospel, and is the co-author of the Emmaus and Pilgrim courses, both of which seek to help people engage with the Christian faith.



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