

Advent 2 6th December 2020

Reflection on Isaiah 40: 1-11

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The theme for today's reflection is "Changing scenes of life" based on Isaiah 40. But for the original audience of Isaiah 40, it was much more than a mere changing life scene. It means a new life altogether where God comes to their rescue and gives them a completely new perspective and home. The language and tone of Isaiah 40 is so different from the preceding Isaiah 1 to 39. Some called it the "New Testament" of Isaiah if you were to treat the book of Isaiah as having two parts, one "Old Testament" part from Isaiah 1 to 39 and the second "New Testament" part thereafter. Others have even suggested that it was the voice of another prophet/writer because the time span between content spoken of in Isaiah 39 and 40 was about 150 years! Regardless, it's the prophet Isaiah looking into the future via the Spirit of the LORD to prophesy about the second and 'greater' exodus i.e. coming of Jesus Christ and fulfilment of God's purpose and mission for humankind.

There are four "voices" here.

First is that of a "mother" (v 1 to 2). It brings comfort and speaks tenderly to the heart. It informs us that the hard labour of sin and rebelliousness had been well served and done so "more than enough" (the Hebrew meaning of "double").

Second is the voice of a "herald" (v 3 to 5). It calls out to the people to prepare the way for the coming of God, to level mountains and terrains, and to create a way through the desert. In doing so, "glory of the LORD" will be revealed for everyone to see.

Third is the voice of "eternity" (v 6 to 8). It speaks of human lives being brief and fragile compared to grass or flowers that withers easily as soon as God's breath blows on them. This is contrasted with the eternity of the Word of God that referred to God Himself in John 1: 1. St Peter quotes this Isaiah passage to explain that this is the preached "living and enduring" Word of God that brought about our new birth (1 Peter 2: 23-25).

Four is the voice to the "cities" (v 9 to 11). A prophet's voice calls to Jerusalem and Judah cities saying "Here is your God"! Two pictures are shown here: a mighty king with his army coming and a loving shepherd gently carrying and leading his flock.

David Runcorn, an Anglican priest and spiritual director in UK, speaks about an exercise for one going through the "changing scenes of life". There are four windows for us to view as we make our spiritual journey with God (see the diagram below). Conveniently the four "voices" of Isaiah 40 can be fitted into the four windows. In the West window, God is asking the Israelites (and us) to know and recognize that it's time for something to be let go (e.g. hard service of sin) and be

comforted. In the South window, God is also showing the Israelites (and us) that He is doing something new in us and that we also need to make preparation and to work. In the North window, we look at the Eternal Word of God who will guide and 'convert' us continually. And finally in the East window, we heard God telling us there is hope and future because God is here and now ("here is your God"). These prophetic words of Isaiah 40 may be the same voices God is speaking to us today. We can hear them through the four windows of our life during changing scenes of our lives.

Voice of a mother

North Window:
What holds you steady?
True North for you?
Your 'value base'?

Voice of eternity

West Window:
What is dying off in your life?
Sinking below the horizon?
Things you should grieve over but let go?

East Window:
What is raising above the horizon?
Earliest beginning of something?
Things you should celebrate & welcome?

Voice of a herald

South Window:
Warming creativity of your life?
Growing tips?
What you wish to develop?

Voice of cities

David Runcorn, Spirituality Workshop; p117