



Isaiah 40.¹⁻²— Meditation

¹Comfort ye,
comfort ye my people, saith your God.
²Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,
and cry unto her,
that her warfare is accomplished,
that her iniquity is pardoned
for she hath received of the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

To begin our Advent and Christmas meditations, we take up a text already beautify as penned by Isaiah, and further beautified by the skilled work of the composer, Handel. These words not only begin Handel's Messiah, but begin a new focus of the great Hebrew Prophet, Isaiah.

Isaiah began his work with a series of often brutal and devastating oracles critical of Israelite society as it existed in Isaiah's day (chapters 1-12). The sorry state of the nation was made all the more tragic when one contemplates the high expectations and hopes God had in calling Israel as his servant to the nations. Israel's failure to fulfill its calling devastated God. Isaiah's opening critique of Israelite society was followed by the famous "Oracles against the Nations" (13-23). The devastation that comes upon Israel's neighbors might rightly be seen, in part, as a consequence of Israel's rebellion against God and its failure in its call to evangelize among the nations. Next comes what I call "The Apocalypse of Isaiah" (24-27). In chapters 28-39, the prophet returns to his criticism of Israelite society. This is accomplished both through oracle and historical evaluation. Finally, with chapter 40, we come to what I have called "The Book of Comfort" (40-66) in which God comforts both Himself and the failed servant with hopes for a brighter future in which Israel lives up to the divine expectations as servant to both God and the nations.

Isaiah's "Book of Comfort" brought comfort to sixth century B.C. Jews living in exile. Surely, this was the original context and principal focus. But, later, these same words brought comfort and meaning to first century Christians who enjoyed the appearance of the long-awaited Messiah. They might very well yet bring comfort to a future generation of Jews awaiting Messiah, and Christians awaiting Messiah's return. The comfort found in these chapters are certainly appropriate to the Christmas season, as Handel realized.

The opening words of today's text, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," are repeated over and over again in this later portion of Isaiah.

"Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth;
and break forth into singing, O mountains:
for the Lord hath comforted his people,
and will have mercy upon his afflicted."¹

¹ Isaiah 49.¹³

“For the LORD shall comfort Zion:
he will comfort all her waste places;
and he will make her wilderness like Eden,
and her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness shall be found therein,
thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.”²

“Break forth into joy, sing together,
ye waste places of Jerusalem:
for the LORD hath comforted his people,
he hath redeemed Jerusalem.
¹⁰The LORD hath made bare his holy arm
in the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.”³

“Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her,
all ye that love her:
rejoice for joy with her,
all ye that mourn for her:
That ye may suck, and be satisfied
with the breasts of her consolations;
that ye may milk out, and be delighted
with the abundance of her glory.
For thus saith the LORD,
Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream:
then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides,
and be dandled upon her knees.
As one whom his mother comforteth,
so will I comfort you;
and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”⁴

How appropriate, then, that according to Luke, Jesus used the words of Isaiah to open his earthly ministry and describe what he saw as his mission.

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me;
because the LORD hath anointed me
to preach good tidings unto the meek;
he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all that mourn;
To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion,

² Isaiah 51.³

³ Isaiah 52.⁹⁻¹⁰

⁴ Isaiah 66.¹⁰⁻¹³

to give unto them beauty for ashes,
the oil of joy for mourning,
the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
that they might be called trees of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD,
that he might be glorified.”⁵

These few passages only scratch the surface of the comfort that is offered in this last portion of Isaiah. They hardly scratch the surface of the comfort Jesus can and does bring to those who come to him. During the Christmas season, we are appreciative of God’s ability to comfort his people in whatever time and circumstances they may find themselves. And, of course, we are most appreciative of the comfort that can come to us this very Christmas season as we remember, think on, and make appeals to the greatest comforter of all, the King of peace, even Jesus Christ.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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⁵ Isaiah 61.¹⁻³. The difference between this and Luke’s reading can be explained by Luke’s use of the Septuagint. I have expanded slightly on Luke’s reading as it was common practice to refer to a smaller portion of text with the expectation that the smaller portion would bring the entire portion of scripture to mind.