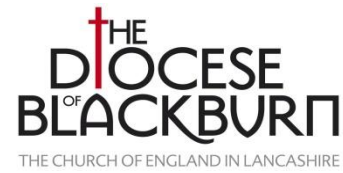


WEEKLY SERMON

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Comfort

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40, 1-2)

What do you think when you hear the word 'Comfort'? Maybe your favourite, easy-to-eat food. Maybe a lovely pamper weekend at a spa hotel with foot massage and cream scones. Maybe sitting in front of the fire on a nice soft sofa with a kitten on your lap.

So when we read these words from Isaiah, written as the Jewish people were returning from exile in Babylon to the city of Jerusalem, it perhaps conjures up for us similar images. It makes God sound really cuddly and cosy; a consumer deity who is there above all to make us feel good about ourselves.

But the use of the word comfort to mean something that gives us physical ease is quite recent and to understand these words from Isaiah we need to dig back a bit. 'Comfort' derives from two Latin words: 'con' (with) and 'fortis' (strength). God's plan is much richer than helping us for a short while to feel a better about ourselves as we struggle through the tough things in life. Much more significantly, he gives us his own strength. He fortifies us.

And where does that strength come from? Isaiah was able to speak these words over the Jewish because their time in exile had given them atonement for their sins. They could be comforted (strengthened) because they had dealt with sin. The strength they received from God was the fruit of repentance.

And today God offers the same to us. Advent is a season that calls us to repentance. As we prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus afresh into our lives, we are invited to reflect on those times we have failed to live in God's way, to acknowledge our utter need of him, to turn round and make a fresh start in our relationship with him. But this repentance is not about destroying our self-worth or making us feel guilty and useless. Rather repentance is what gives us strength because it makes the space for God to go to work in our lives.

We are living through hard times as a nation at the moment. Many will be asking themselves, 'How do I find the strength to carry on?' The answer is, if you are looking within yourself, you won't. The strength we need is the strength that comes from God. And that is the fruit of repentance, because

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when we acknowledge our own weakness, we allow God himself to strengthen with us power from on high.

This Advent, heed the call to repentance. And allow God to comfort you with the strength that comes from above.

Rt Rev Philip North
Bishop of Burnley