

Sunday 4th February 2018 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		5th Sunday after the Epiphany 5th Sunday of the Year B Education Sunday
Isaiah 40:21-31	Ps 147:1-11	1 Cor 9:16-23
		Mark 1:29-39
STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY		

“Young men may grow weary and faint, even the fittest may stumble and fall; but those who look to the Lord will win new strength, they will soar as on eagles’ wings; they will run and not feel faint, march on and not grow weary.” (Isaiah 40:30-31)

1. NEW YEAR, NEW BEGINNINGS

Welcome to visitors and newcomers with us this morning, to those who have been away. It is good to be back after a wonderful holiday! My personal thanks to all who have been responsible for our Sunday worship and ministry during January – our sub dean and clergy colleagues, lay leadership, our many volunteers. We can still – just – say “Happy new year!” or “Compliments of the season!” I hope that the year has begun smoothly and happily for you all.

Returning to work can be something of a shock, and we often have to hit the ground running. It can be overwhelming! So much to do. Demands that come our way. Urgency to get things done. Anxiety as to what might happen. Excitement and nervousness with the start of a new school or academic year. It is Rhodes University O-week - new students arriving here in Grahamstown, leaving home for the first time, saying goodbye to parents; parents having to let your darling son or daughter go and send them on their way. However, I think sometimes it is easier for parents to send their children away so that we parents don’t see what our student children get up to!

On the broader front, we continue to watch the news with concern and anxiety – the state of the nation address on Thursday; the severe drought, with Cape Town facing water cut-offs as Day Zero approaches; towns here in the Eastern Cape who have run dry;

potential turmoil at universities as registration commences, with the promise of free education for many. Daunting times for us all.

This is a time to hear God's call on our lives; to find courage and direction for the way ahead; to receive strength for the journey. From Isaiah: "...those who look to the Lord will win new strength, they will soar as on eagles' wings; they will run and not feel faint, march on and not grow weary." (Isaiah 40:31). May this be our "motto", our key verse, for the months ahead.

2. ISAIAH:

Isaiah 40... is the beginning of the middle section of the prophet Isaiah that we refer to as "Second Isaiah" – it is the middle chapters of this great book. It is the word of the prophet to the people of Israel, in exile. They had experienced defeat and national catastrophe. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The temple had been looted, pillaged and burned. The leaders had been deported to Babylon. They had lost land, temple, the kingship – all the signs of God's love for them. But things were about to change. Isaiah comes to them with a word of hope.

But first there is the call of God to Isaiah: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." (Isa 40:1) He receives his calling and he is given a task.

The first call of Isaiah comes in Chapter 6. Isaiah is in the temple; he sees "the Lord sitting on a throne" (Is 6:1) in glory, surrounded by two heavenly beings. The voice of the Lord who says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah responds, "Here am I, send me!"

But in chapter 40, there is no vision of God. Isaiah hears only the voices – the voice of God; and two other voices – perhaps the two heavenly beings that he sees in chapter 6.

But what these voices say to Isaiah, and through him to the people of God, is revolutionary and life-changing.

The chapter begins – “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” What does comfort mean? We comfort one another during times of bereavement; the death of a loved one; a huge disappointment; the loss of a job; when all hope has gone. When we are at the end of our tether – then we need comfort, we look for comfort, we give comfort.

Today it is God who extends this word of comfort to his people, us, you and me.

What is this word of comfort? It is that God is bigger than we think. We read and listen to the prophets to hear the big picture, to be given the grand narrative, to catch a glimpse of the sweep of history, the great national events that affect our nation, our community, the people of God. Isaiah speaks to the nation of Israel. His prophecies are no longer only about a local god for the nation; instead, the prophecies of Isaiah in chapters 40 – 55 are part of a developing understanding, a growing revelation, of the God for all people, for all time. One universal God. No longer a multiple collection of gods and religions. And in time his prophecies point to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who came for the salvation of all people, who moved among the people bringing healing and life and hope.

Words of comfort:

1. the nature of God – God the creator...Lord of creation

“It is he [God] who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers...” (40:22)

“The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” (40:28)

People all over the world were delighting in the blue moon on Wednesday evening (apart from here in Grahamstown, where it was wonderfully raining) – this great beautiful moon, larger than normal. We live in a world of immense beauty and wonder and delight.

Let's trust in God the creator... even in the face of turmoil and upheaval and possible chaos as towns and cities begin to run out of water...

The drought we are experiencing is forcing us to be more aware of one another; we can't live independent lives; if others are thirsty, and we have water, we are all involved; if communities or cities run dry, it will affect us all. We are inter-dependent. And we have a wasteful life-style, with little respect for the created world. God the creator calls us to care for one another, and to care for all of creation. The drought is a huge wake-up call for us.

2. the sovereignty of God...Lord of history

“It is he [God] ... who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing...” (40:23)

These princes and rulers of the earth who imagine that they control the destinies of nations are “as nothing”.

“Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown... when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.” (Is 40:24)

Let's trust in God who is sovereign, who is above all, in the face of upheaval and change...and let's trust him as Lord of our lives, with the unknown that lies ahead.

3. the resources of God

God, who...

40:29 “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

40:31 “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.”

3. AND SO...STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

As we enter into this new year, this new academic term, the unknown of 2018: God reminds us to look to him, to wait on him, for strength for the journey. The journey is our baptismal lives of worship, witness and service. We live this out at work, on campus, in our community, at home. It is the journey of inner transformation so that we become more like Christ. The journey is the basic spiritual disciplines that lead to inner transformation and conversion of the heart: daily prayer, scripture study and reading, attendance at worship, serving the poor.

The call to worship is the call to be part of a Christian community, to come to church. It is the call to daily prayer, following the example of Jesus. It is the call to scripture study, to read and reflect on the word of God to us through the scriptures.

Consider a quiet afternoon to get you going, this coming Saturday. Join the regular times of prayer at the Cathedral during the week. Set aside your own time, like Jesus, alone, in silence.

Immerse ourselves in scripture. Lent is around the corner. We are offering a wide variety of special fellowship and Bible groups. I encourage each member of the Cathedral to be part of a group for Lent. Please choose a group and sign up!

In the busyness of our lives, let's not neglect coming to church, gathering with others, being part of the Christian community. A burning log in the fire quickly goes cold if you take it out of the fire... we need the grace and strength from God... this is part of waiting on the Lord so that he will renew our strength...

Worship includes faithful financial support for the life and ministry of the Cathedral and the wider church.

The call to witness is to live lives that point to Jesus Christ. Like Jesus, to be channels of the Father's love. Let us be instruments of healing and hope. Let us be reconcilers. Let us reach out across boundaries and barriers. Let us be bridge-builders in our diverse and international community and Cathedral. Let us say no to xenophobia and racism and corruption and homophobia. Let us embrace justice and integrity. Let us avoid any abuse of power. Let us be faithful in our marriages and our relationships.

The call to serve is the call to make a difference. To be involved. To serve those in need, whoever they may be.

Service includes being involved in the life of the Cathedral – Sunday School, children's church; readers; altar servers; sidespeople and welcomers.

Service can include being part of church governance. As we prepare for Vestry next month, please think about offering yourself for PCC. It is the hidden work of a group of deeply dedicated people who administer the life of the Cathedral and enable things to happen.

The Gospel reading describes Jesus going out early in the morning by himself to pray. The hidden work of prayer, that makes everything else possible.

The work of PCC in ensuring good governance and stewardship is the hidden work of the Cathedral, this hidden service that makes everything else possible, this hidden work without which the public life of the Cathedral cannot continue.

Is this your time? I have tried over the years to encourage people to stand for PCC, not always successfully. Now is the time. We need both continuity and institutional knowledge, familiar faces, people

who know the ropes and are experienced in governance – and how wonderfully we have been served by our churchwardens and PCC this past year; and we need fresh blood and new energy. Is this your time?

Serving others is also serving our neighbours:

Community involvement and water... a serious change in town planning to use water wisely; gutters and water tanks on all properties; water comes from God but it costs money to build dams, put in pipes, bring water to urban communities...

The work of local residents, the Grahamstown Residents Association, fixing the roads, filling potholes, pulling together as a community...

CONCLUSION

And through all this... “but those who look to the Lord will win new strength, they will soar as on eagles’ wings; they will run and not feel faint, march on and not grow weary.” (Isaiah 40:31)

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