



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

Archbishop Stephen gave the sermon at the Christmas Day Eucharist at York Minster. This follows in full

You can watch the whole service on [York Minster's YouTube](#) channel

“Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people.” - Isaiah 52.9

For the last 30 years or so my mother has sung in the scratch Messiah at the Royal Albert Hall. It is a tremendous occasion. The choir of many hundreds fills three quarters of the hall and the much smaller audience occupy the remaining seats. For a great many of those years I have been part of that audience. When such a huge choir rises to sing the first chorus it is a spine tinglingly, glorious thing, though not always as polished as we are used to with the choir of York Minster.

However, before that, the tenor sings the first aria and as many of you may know, the libretto for Handel's Messiah is a tapestry of scripture, different texts woven together to tell the whole story of our salvation.

The opening words are from Isaiah chapter 40 –

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.” (Isaiah 40.1)

I always find this hauntingly beautiful.

Of all the verses from scripture that could have been chosen it is this single word ‘comfort’ that sets the scene and captures the meaning of all that will follow.

All that God has done for us in Jesus Christ; all the pains and insults he has borne for us; all the sorrows he has carried; all that has been achieved by his death and resurrection; and all the promise that is held in his birth and coming among us is summed up in this one word: comfort.

“Comfort ye.”

Isn't this the vital message of Christmas?

And isn't this what we need to hear this Christmas more than ever?

In English, the word ‘comfort’ carries the popular meaning of ‘assistance’ and ‘consolation’, but also the literal meaning, ‘to be strengthened’.

So, yes, God is coming among us as one of us: this is the great Christmas proclamation; God's word made flesh in Jesus Christ. And he will wipe away every tear: he will comfort us. But he will also *strengthen us* to live our lives well and to face life's inevitable trials, sorrows and horrors.

We may also note that sometimes in scripture the Holy Spirit is called 'comforter'.

However, these words in Isaiah 40 are not addressed directly to the people from God, but to the prophet who is then charged by God to speak words of comfort. It is, if you like, his commission. And if you read on a little further, the prophet asks God, "What shall I say?" (Isaiah 40.6) And God replies;

"All people are grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades... but the word of our God will stand for ever." (Isaiah 40.7a & 8)

And then goes on –

"See, the Lord God comes with might... (and) he will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." (Isaiah 40.10a & 11)

The message of the Christian faith is two edged. It is both kinds of comfort.

It is the resolute message of God's enduring support for us, right in the midst of the fragility and transience of human life, its difficulties, its challenges and its horrors, a reminder of God's commitment to the world. It is tough love and tough comfort.

And then it is a message of such sweetness, such sublime tenderness, such understanding of our humanity because in Christ God has climbed inside our humanity and God is like a Shepherd who feeds his flock and gathers the lambs in his arms.

It is this message we receive at Christmas.

It is this message we are called to share.

This Christmas feels harder than ever. Our world feels fragile. There is war in Europe. A cost of living crisis is hitting the poorest disproportionately. Our health service seems to be creaking at the seams. Public sector workers feel forced to strike. The impact of climate emergency ever more visible and pressing. In parts of East Africa, they haven't had any proper rain for nearly three years. In Northern Kenya, an area I know well, 80% of their livestock has died.

I am not here to offer political analysis. But I do want to offer hope. The hope that was born in a manger and offers hope to the world. It is about the comfort we offer each other in the name of Christ, putting the needs of others before ourselves; and it is the strength and resolve to bear

witness to the values and standards of the kingdom of God.

Indeed, my other favourite line in Messiah is during the great Alleluia chorus when from Revelation 11.15 the choir sing: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God."

This is the great hope of the Gospel, the vision that sustains us. The angels singing of peace on earth. The shepherds marvelling at what they've seen. The child Jesus, who is God among us, God's word made flesh.

And through it all – through all the many hardships and toils, the joys and challenges that we face and the world faces, when we are at our best and when we feel we can sink no lower - God continually and untiringly and tenderly sings his song of hope and love to us. God is committed to



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