

Advent 4, 2019  
Comfort in a Manger

Isaiah 40:1-11

St. Andrew's Church, Jacksonville, OR

By Fr. Bill Baker

*"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith God. Speak, ye priests, to the heart of Jerusalem..."*

And already, two things must be remarked upon before I get to far. First *"...speak **ye priests** to the heart of Jerusalem"* is from the English translation of the Greek Septuagint used in the Orthodox Church. I like it because it makes it personal. Second, I think we need to know why it is that Isaiah wants the priests to speak comfort to the inhabitants of the land. You see, the kingship of Hezekiah, although a good steward overall, comes with mixed reviews. Hezekiah was the son of King Ahaz and a righteous king according to Second Kings chapter 18. And in the Gospel of Matthew (1:10) we also learn that Hezekiah is in the lineage of Jesus himself. He purified the temple, reformed the priesthood and abolished idolatry. He is portrayed throughout history as a good king. But like David, a man after God's own heart, Hezekiah was not perfect.

Two chapters before our reading from Isaiah chapter 40 we find Hezekiah preoccupied with his health. Isaiah has brought bad news; Hezekiah has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. And upon hearing the news Hezekiah drops to his knees and prays thus: *"Remember now O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart and have done that which is good in thy sight."* And then he weeps.

An understandable prayer, but there is an issue here. Hezekiah, the king of Judah who holds a nation in his hands seems to have no concern for the inhabitants under his rule once his life comes to an end. There is no thought of what his absence might inflict on those who will survive him. Of course there is a natural concern for one's self preservation when we know that our final days are upon us, but it is also natural to desire that things be put in order to ensure the comfort of those who will be left to

carry on. But Hezekiah prays solely for himself...vanity! God hears his prayer and adds 15 years to his life, but they will not be good years.

Merodach Baladan, the King of Babylon, upon hearing of Hezekiah's recovery comes for a visit. Hezekiah is enchanted by the visit and seeks to impress this king from afar. Showing the foreign king his house Hezekiah leaves no stone unturned *There was nothing, scripture tells us, in his house or in all his dominion that Hezekiah showed him not.*" Again vanity! After all that the Lord had done for him he is ensnare by covetousness and pride. After the visit Hezekiah would get the bad news of the cost of his selfish response to God's gift of life. After his self-centered prayer and grand show of arrogance, the Lord spoke to Isaiah words to share with the King:

*"Then said Isaiah to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord. And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. Then said Hezekiah to Isaiah, Good is the word of the Lord, which thou hast spoken. He said moreover, For there shall be peace and truth in my days"* (Isaiah 39:5-8). *"Peace and truth in **my** days."* Vanity and selfish indulgence to the very end! Seems that the king has forgotten the importance of a life lived for the good of those left behind as well as a life lived for the glory of God.

It has been more than 2700 years since Hezekiah entered this world and it seems that not much has changed in the political establishment to bring humanity closer together or closer to God. Kings and presidents seem to have a way of tendering toward a more secular way of life with personal indulgences seen as rewards well earned. Can we get to the real truth of our existence as a human race through the self-centered agendas of even our greatest leaders? Hezekiah was a great leader and yet he too would succumb to vanity and leave the true love of God and security of others for another generation to ponder.

Our Lord would have to seek another source by which the people might find peace and love...The Almighty seeks the comforting discipline of the priests; *"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith God. Speak, ye priests, to the heart of Jerusalem..."* This is the job of a priest...to speak truth in

comfort no matter the season. When a nation is given way to vanity and self-centered preoccupation it becomes the task of the parish minister to shed light and to give hope.

Our times are getting dark...but people have grown accustomed to the dark and without the light of Jesus Christ there is only despair; *"The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.* Time is fleeting! Truth is at the door. The seasons are changing...the days are drawing to a close. But in the midst of the darkness a voice, an ephemeral voice says CRY! A voice from without yet heard only from within...the Holy Spirit embracing the hearts of those who seek.

*The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever;"* These are comforting words. The word that would become a man and dwell elbow to elbow with the flesh and blood of humanity holds the keys to eternity. Without Christ, yes, there is despair, without Christ we will wither as the grass and fade as the flower, but with Christ we have a hope that crushes the depraving lies the world has to offer. *"...Lift up your voice...be not afraid...and behold your God!*

Yes...behold your God...born in flesh and blood and lying in a manger. The world has its Caesar's, its Pharisees and its scribes but it also has its wisemen, apostles and its priests. In faith we trust in this babe once girted with hay and surrounded by the smell of animal life; humble beginnings for such a king as this. But behold...Behold your God...

*"And the voice said, cry..."* And what did it cry? *"Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight* (Luke 3:4). That's the cry! John's is the baptism of repentance but through the incarnation of the God-man Jesus the Christ, we have received the remission of our sin and live everlasting lives through the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the fire of persecution. The Incarnation of God into the lives of mankind means everything. It is only through His coming into the world that He could give His life for the world.

Comfort?...I will give you words of comfort that will conquer any condition or set of circumstances you find yourself in, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16). This is the good news...this is the comfort come directly from God and this is the comfort I share with you today. *“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men”* (Luke 2:10-14).

Let us make our way to the manger and let us give glory and praise to the King of kings.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.