

Comfort O Comfort my People, starts our reading, and that seems like a very good reading to be hearing today. We are somewhat comforted, and see more comfort coming in the near future. But we're not there yet.

In church, I'm going to say 'We're back in Church. Hooray.' as an example of our comfort, but if you're reading this, you're probably not in church for whatever reason. Some of us are back in church, and presumably celebrating that little return of normality, but we're not all together, we're missing those who aren't there and the service in church is still very strange; not much singing, a shorter simpler service, no coffee afterwards. We hear a lot of news of a vaccine being imminent, or at least the roll-out will start very soon, but it'll take a long time before everyone has it, before we can get back to how things were before.

Maybe it's worth reflecting on the situation of the first hearers of our reading. It was probably written when Israel was in exile in Babylon, but just about to be able to be allowed back to Jerusalem. That was the great comfort being promised, they would no longer be living in a foreign land, they could rebuild the temple and get on with life as it was before. But, just as in our situation waiting for a vaccine, there were a lot of difficult details before everything is sorted. They had to complete an arduous journey across a desert, then rebuild the temple, and then remember what their traditions actually were; they'd been away for 70 years. Would the normality that returned actually be the same as what happened before. It seems to me that this promise of comfort is not that they're going home, but that all these things that were needed to make their dreams come true weren't actually as hard as they seemed, that they'd make it through this last home straight. Don't give up now when you're nearly there.

These words have long been treated by Christians as not only referring to the events near the time they were written, of Israel's return from Babylon, but also prefiguring Christ, which is why we are hearing them just before Christmas. The description of John the Baptist, as the voice crying in the wilderness, is quoting this passage, as we heard in the gospel reading.

So, as we try to turn our focus towards Christmas, maybe this passage, and our current situation, might say something to us. As we await Christmas, as we await the coming of the messiah, we're awaiting a great transformation, in our hearts, in our lives and also in society. Maybe it's more meaningful to us this year as we go about our lives in ways that are clearly in need of transformation.

Or maybe the rollout of vaccines is a bit of an analogy for Christmas. We spend all year watching the research, talking excitedly with our friends about the progress of this trial compared to that one, and then it's approved and, straight away, nothing happens. This makes no difference to anyone. A very complex process of rolling it out now needs to start, and will take months.

Compare that with Christmas. We read dramatic readings from the old testament about the coming saviour of the world, how things must be shouted from mountaintops, about how valleys are to be lifted up and mountains made low. And then Christmas comes. And all this excitement is about a newborn baby that can't do very much apart from wave his arms and legs about a bit.

Remember that, especially if, in a couple of weeks, you find yourself in an underwhelming Christmas service, as you hum along to the couple of carols in the service, which unfortunately don't include your favourite one. Remember that, despite appearances, something dramatic is happening, the world is being transformed. We are on the start of a journey to the kingdom of God. A journey that will not be easy, as the Israelites had to cross the mountainous desert, the journey will go through Lent and Good Friday. But at Christmas, we will celebrate that the journey has begun.

So, as we wait for something that will transform our lives, be it a vaccine or the coming of Christ, that transformation may be more slow and subtle than we'd hoped, but maybe that's what's really needed to transform things. And now is the time to prepare. Think about how we want the normal that our lives return to, to actually be different to what went before. Make straight the path for the lord. Search for comfort, but comfort that will truly last.