

*In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,
Amen*

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle.

Isaiah is comforting demoralised people - people who were disorientated and trapped, longterm exiles in Babylon, cut off from their homeland and their traditional holy places. They couldn't worship properly. They had lost their identity and purpose. Jerusalem had been destroyed, families torn apart, their country lost. The Jewish people were not so sure anymore that they still believed in the God of their ancestors. Their fertile well-ordered covenant faith landscape had become lost in the thorns and briers of foreign enslavement.

But Isaiah is confident. God has power to transform their blighted world:
You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Lyrical, hopeful words for beleaguered people. God's kingdom is refreshing, abundant. The natural world is in close harmony with God with inherent value as God's creation. This is a green prophecy. Humans are being called into a mutually beneficial relationship with the wider natural world which participates in the restoration of the people - constantly interwoven and interdependent threads.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people. Isaiah promises the exiles of Judah that restoration and renewal are germinating just under the surface of the earth: **I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth - do you not perceive it?**

The challenge to beleaguered people then and now is to hear and embrace the word of hope and live into its promise. The exiles must take the first step home by rejecting the values of the empire - aligning themselves with the alternative world of God's transforming kingdom.

This is the same challenge Jesus places before us when he teaches the crowds sitting on the beach. Jesus tells how the kingdom of God threatens and conflicts with dominant cultural values and structures.

A couple of years ago, Bishop Mark arranged a study course in Arpafeelie to take a fresh look at Matthew's Gospel. The writers of those "Urban Matthew" materials, Paul Skirrow and Peter Winn, are priests in Liverpool ministering alongside people living on the margins, affected daily by prejudice, illness and poverty. They taught that in Matthew's gospel the only true king is God, and true kingship, modelled by Jesus, consists in service and in seeking justice for those who are poor and marginal. In their radical analysis it is not just physical force that enables the powerful to rule the world but control of the minds of populations and peoples. When there is

control of what people believe and how they view the world it is easy for dominant institutions to make them accept their situation.

Jesus sees through the ruling myth of his day - the privileges of the religious and political elites. He offers an alternative rooted in the Covenant that the liberating God has made with his people Israel. Jesus radically deconstructs all human pretension to power and control.

In today's parable Jesus speaks directly to a large crowd of peasants struggling to live off the land, using images that would ring true to their experience as subsistence farmers. They would know all about only being allowed to work poorer land on the margins - the richer soil being kept well out of their reach. Jesus is raising the consciousness of the common people who hear him. He had already healed and affirmed them, lifting burdens from them, crossing social boundaries to spend time, compassion and energy with those considered unloved and unlovable in their poverty, vulnerability and insignificance.

Feeling vulnerable, economically cut adrift, insignificant. Feeling out of kilter, forgotten. Feeling at the same time more appreciative of the natural world and of small acts of human kindness. Being more aware of political and environmental issues, more aware of inequality and injustice. These days of lockdown and exile from our church gatherings may have brought us all of these emotions and more - in a time of heightened sensitivity .

People worldwide are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic as an exile from the usual structures and comforts of life. For African-Americans, the persistent realities of institutionalised racism make the United States an ongoing site of exile. For environmentalists the pandemic offers possibly the last chance to reduce our carbon footprints and act to reverse climate change.

Our task is both to lean into the words of comfort from Isaiah and into the Gospel message of a God who liberates and transforms and calls us as co-workers to found a society shaped by peace, justice and hope. In the radical analysis of the parable of the sower Jesus is confronting a biased and skewed economy where there is unequal access to land and resources, where those who already have, receive more because of unfair entitlement. We don't need to look too hard to see equivalent examples of economic injustice and environmental exploitation around us today.

As individuals and churches emerge from coronavirus exile may we in solidarity hold to the prophetic vision of Isaiah and to the teaching of Jesus, strengthened for compassionate action by the core of St Paul's message to the church in Rome: **The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free.**

Amen