

“HERE IS YOUR GOD - 1”
Isaiah 40:1-39

Isaiah 40 is one of those great prophetic readings from the Old Testament that are traditionally read during Advent as we look forward to celebrating the birth that the prophets were looking forward to back then. We've taken these prophecies to refer to the coming of Jesus Christ and read into them all kinds of things with the benefit of hindsight that the original prophets and their audiences never could. Over the next three weeks, we're going to reflect on the words of this chapter and allow them to speak to us of the God we worship and of the Son of God who came into our world to make him real to us. (The third and final sermon will be part of the evening carol service, but you don't need to hear all three for them to make sense – I hope.)

This was originally a prophecy given to the people of Israel who were being held hostage in Babylon. Chapter 40 begins the second section of the book of *Isaiah*, and takes up the story about a hundred and fifty years after the events of the preceding chapter. All the things that were predicted in 39:5-8 have now happened and the defeated people of Israel have been deported into exile in the capital city of their conquerors. This chapter, then, begins a new dawn of hope for God's people and there is the command in this chapter for the prophet to preach the good news of some kind of release from this situation. In v9, the English words “*you who bring good tidings*” are one word in Hebrew and in the Greek they are translated by the one word which in the English New Testament is given as “*evangelist*”. The herald of this good news, the evangelist, is to proclaim to the people that God is going to make himself known to his people again. The content of the sermon is given in the four short words in v9 which are the title for these three sermons – “*Here is your God!*”

That's the message. God is here amongst his people – he is with them, ready to help them and to save them from the situation that they have been in for so long now. God is here. God is with them. That calls to mind one of the names which was to be given to Jesus according to the story of the angel appearing to Joseph in *Matthew 1:23*. Jesus was to be called “*Immanuel – which means ‘God with us’.*” As Christmas approaches, we once again hear God's word to us as he says, “*Here is your God!*”. This is the message that we have to take to heart and the message which we have to proclaim. Many of us, maybe, need to rediscover the God in whom we claim to trust. And many of those amongst whom we live and work need to see something of that God in us. But what is this God like? What do we mean when we talk about God? What are the aspects of his character that can help us in our worship, our work and our witness?

Back in 1991 we looked at this passage during Advent and noted a few things that we learn here about God. And I finished by saying, “There is so much more that could be said, so many other aspects of God's character ... that we could talk about them for ever.” So, today and next Sunday we'll look at some of the things this passage tells us about God and at the Carol Service see how that all comes together in Jesus. And, once again, we need to realise that we are simply scratching the surface in what we sat this morning, but it will, I hope, inspire us in our worship.

This passage is packed with all kinds of wonderful things about God. The prophet is called to prepare people for the coming of this God, to prepare them to meet this God whom they are rediscovering in the depths of their exile and dislocation. In vv3-5 we read those words – applied in the New Testament to John the Baptist – about the way in which people are to be made ready for “*glory of the LORD to be revealed*”. And when the prophet asks what he is to proclaim, he is told that the first thing to note is the transient nature of humanity. In vv6-8 there is a poetic description of the human condition as a field of grass that lasts a short time then is burnt up. We're not here long in the great scheme of things, a relatively brief life, then soon forgotten. But God is there for ever. And his words are timeless. What he says will endure – and therefore he will endure. This morning we're going to focus on just three things about God that we read in these verses – three things that are pretty awesome when we stop to think about them, but three things that should give us encouragement as we seek to follow him.

1. INCOMPARABLE (vv18,25)

God is totally unique. We may try to compare him to various things – usually with human attributes – but that will only limit him and domesticate him. There are all manner of different ways of describing God – from Creator to Shepherd, from General of an army (Lord of Hosts) to a loving Father. They all focus on one aspect of his character but none of them can ever do him justice. The trouble is, we often end up emphasising one aspect of his character to the detriment of all the others and end up with a false picture of him, an idol which says more about us than about him.

Isaiah speaks here of the making of idols and there are other passages in this book and in others where the folly, the absurdity of trying to make an idol to represent God is described. You cannot limit God. But so often we do, don't we? We major on his love and forget his judgement and righteousness. Some speak of him as only an avenger and forget his grace and mercy. For some he is the ultimate revolutionary, yet others conscript him to the cause of the establishment. You can argue for him being a socialist or a Tory, a gracious Father or a tyrannical ogre, a lion or a lamb, an excuse for ethnic cleansing or a scourge of all who discriminate. But if you do that you are simply comparing him to what you already know, filtering your understanding of him through your own limited knowledge and wisdom.

As we so often sing, "*Our God is an awesome God*". He is amazing, spectacular, gentle, powerful, astonishing, astounding, like nothing ever seen or heard. Of course, we need to find ways of trying to appreciate who he is and ways of directing our worship, but God is beyond any of those things, utterly unique, of a different order from anything we can conceive from our own experience. Even those few men and women who were favoured with a glimpse of God and his glory could not effectively put it into words, as we saw last week when we considered the problems John had describing the vision that he wrote down in *Revelation*.

2. INCOMPREHENSIBLE (vv12ff)

As we've already suggested, because God is incomparable, it means he's also in many ways incomprehensible. He's way outside our spheres of reference, so we cannot understand him or his ways. Look at what Isaiah says in v13 and v28. Over the centuries men and women have attempted to write down their systematic theologies, tying up the loose ends, setting out the parameters of God's being and activity, trying to get it all to fit together. In many ways it does – I'm not trying to argue that God is beyond reason or that his activity is frivolous or maverick. But God and his activity are full of tensions and paradoxes. There are many things that we cannot seem to nail down so that we can illustrate it in diagrams or express it in theorems.

How do we reconcile the sovereignty of God – which is taught throughout the Bible – with the responsibility of human beings for their actions – which is also taught throughout the Bible? How do we put together a God who wants everyone to be saved with a God who is prepared to send many to hell? How do we cope with the things that happen in our own lives without any seeming rhyme or reason despite the fact that we've prayed hard about such things? These are the questions that are being asked here and which are treated at much greater length elsewhere – if you've got the time to spare read the book of *Job*, one of the greatest works of literature, poetry, theology, philosophy and worship ever written.

But isn't that also a great comfort? If you can trust God – and, of course, all this boils down to that in the end – if you can trust God, then you need to let him get on with it. No-one advises God. He doesn't need our perspective on things to be able to speak and act. Can you imagine the chaos that would ensue if the almighty God of the universe had to consult with us every time a problem occurred? We can't even come up with a scheme to refurbish the church or re-organise the services or ensure that everyone has a seat at Monday Lunch! Imagine God having to ask us for help.

And because he is so great, he can see the bigger picture. We may look at our situation and try to work out what's going on but we have a very limited perspective. God looks at our situation across the broad sweep of history. He sees how it fits into the affairs of the whole world, the whole universe. He knows what would happen if we took a particular course of action because he can see beyond the present and beyond our little bit of geography. If you ever watch *QI* you will be aware of the extraordinary breadth of knowledge that Stephen Fry seems to have (bolstered by a team of researchers, no doubt). The other participants on the programme often seem in awe of him – which is no doubt why he is so insufferably smug. But what he knows is as nothing compared with the knowledge of God. His knowledge and his being are such that we will never fully exhaust our examination of them, even as we live on into eternity with him. It's frightening in some ways, but comforting in others. When we say, in moments of blasphemous frustration, "*God knows!*", it's true – he does. But we can only marvel and worship.

3. INDEFATIGABLE (vv28ff)

Finally, for this morning – and even more comfortingly – God is always there, always active. He never grows tired or weary, he never slumbers nor sleeps. All of us, however fit we are, however relaxed we are, however inspired we are, find that we have to rest, we have to sleep. Margaret Thatcher famously existed on four hours sleep a night – which may explain a lot! – but we lesser mortals can't live life without getting tired and weary and needing to sleep (as some of you may well be doing even now).

It's great to know that God is always there, always watching, always alert, always ready to protect us and help us, to lead us and guide us. And it's great to know, too, that he shares that strength with us. Life can grind us down, can't it? And trying to serve God in the things that go on at church on top of our daily work and our home life can drain us of energy and resources. But God "*gives strength to the weary*" and as we hope in the Lord that strength is renewed. This great chapter closes with the wonderful image of God's people soaring like eagles, their broad wings spread out to catch the thermal currents which keep them in the air. And the image changes to that of those who run without any exhaustion – many of you who pound the streets of Lichfield and lanes beyond in the pursuit of fitness and the battle against ageing will appreciate that image as you bend over, gasping and coughing at the end of your drive.

That's a promise for those who "*hope in the LORD*", for those who look to God for help and direction, for guidance and help. It's for those who trust in God, despite the fact that they cannot fathom out what he's doing or why: who believe that he has their best interest at heart even though it doesn't always make sense to us. I don't suppose what we've said this morning has answered any questions at all – and how we love to have our questions answered. We probably feel as bewildered by God and his activity as did those exiled Israelites in Babylon. We may be totally mystified by God and his being. But that doesn't mean he is not a great God. He is beyond anything we can imagine, anything we can devise. His being and his activity are difficult to work out, difficult to describe, but we can hang on to the fact that he knows what he's doing and he knows what the ultimate outcome of all this will be – and that that will be for our good and for his glory. We trust in a great God. Let's worship him together now.

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Questions for discussion

1. In what ways can we make idols by trying to describe God? How do idols limit him? How can we think of God if we don't describe him in some way?
2. When we try to understand God we limit him and domesticate him? How? What are the pitfalls in that?
3. How does God give us strength? Are there any ways in which you have experienced that?
4. Is it worth trusting God even if we don't understand him? Why/why not?
5. What do you find most baffling about God?

6. What do you find most comforting about God?