

“HERE IS YOUR GOD! - 2”
Isaiah 40:1-31

Last week, you may recall, we were reflecting on the amazing portrait of God that is painted by the prophet in this fortieth chapter of *Isaiah* as he obeyed the call of God to proclaim “*Here is your God!*”. Here we see the prophet encouraging a people in exile, a people who had begun to think that God had forgotten them, a people who were wondering just what was going on, with glimpses of a God who was still in control, still supreme. Isaiah resisted the temptation to fill in too much detail, because a God whom we can describe in detail can easily become an idol as we focus in on just one small aspect of his character and being. Instead, we are brought face to face with a God who is incomparable, unlike anything or anyone else in the entire universe; a God who is incomprehensible, just too great, too vast, too awesome for our limited human minds to take in; a God who is indefatigable, who never sleeps, never takes his eye off the ball, as it were, never gives up on his care for his creatures. And those who entrust their lives to him can start to share in something of that strength and power that characterise God as they soar like eagles and run without growing weary.

But a God like that can still seem fairly remote. We trust him, despite our inability to comprehend him. We follow him, although we don’t know for sure where he’s taking us. His very uniqueness and otherness can mean that he seems impersonal and out of touch. So there are, within this broad canvas of Isaiah’s portrait of him, some brush strokes that suggest he is wanting to connect with his people, wanting to reach out and help us in our own particular situations. This morning, we’re just going to look at three more aspects of God in *Isaiah 40* that help us get a handle on who he is and what he does, three things that begin to help us connect with him, before we see where it all leads in our Carol Service next Sunday. And once again, we look at these words without trying to fill in too much of the detail which really only speaks about us, rather than about him. John White, in his book *The Shattered Mirror*, writes, “*If God is God, it is important that we know him as he is, not as we recreate him in our imaginations.*” And that might mean that we don’t get all the details filled in, but we know enough to trust him and commit ourselves to him for this life and beyond.

1. POWERFUL (vv10ff)

When God does approach his people, when he does reach out to connect with us, Isaiah tells us that “*he comes with power, and his arm rules for him*”. And as we read on through vv12ff we have a poetic expression of that power being demonstrated in creation and his sustaining of it. This God is a powerful God. He is the “*Sovereign LORD*”. This is a God who does things, who accomplishes things. Wherever you look, particularly in the Old Testament, you see a God who is supreme over every other God, over every other force, over every other power.

This is a God who comes to his people with the power to save them, the power to punish them, the power to protect them, the power to humble them. That power is seen from the very outset as he speaks into being the universe and all created things, calling them from the formless void and primeval chaos. This is a God who shares his power with humanity until they abuse it and he has to keep his promise to make them experience the consequences of that disobedience. This is the God who routed armies, who visited plagues upon the Egyptian, who stopped seas and rivers from flowing, who brought drought and rain, who raised up kings and emperors and then threw them to the ground – all in pursuit of his eternal plan to isolate evil and deal with it once and for all.

This is a God in whom we can trust, in whom we must trust, for there is no other god, no other power that can possibly stand against him. His people in Israel had made the mistake of trusting in other gods, in trusting in other alliances, in trusting in all the things that God had warned them against. And now Isaiah was having to preach to people who had felt the awful consequences of ignoring God and doubting his power. When we put our trust in God, we put our trust in the only power, the only being that can possibly deliver our ultimate security.

2. PASTORAL (v11)

Now that can seem as if we are simply trusting in a tyrant who has bullied us into submission – a bit like paying protection money to The Mob (the Mafia, that is, not the church youth group – although there are some eerie similarities!). But that is not what it is all about. And Isaiah is at pains to point out that God does not behave like that. Yes, he is all-powerful, and yes, he does use that power in ways that can be frightening and unsettling – but only to those who do not really know him. Isaiah here uses the image of a shepherd to make his point. Look at v11. Here we have a picture that seems very different, but once again it is a picture that perfectly complements everything else that the prophet has said about him. (Remember, though, as we warned last week, this is only one aspect of him.)

The image is one of a shepherd who tenderly watches over the vulnerable sheep in his flock. He cuddles them to his chest. He leads them gently and carefully along the paths which they have yet to discover, but which he is sure of. He is there to protect them with that great power of which the prophet has already written. There is no real discrepancy between power and gentleness. Some of you have heard me talk of my friend Pete, who sadly died in his thirties. But Pete was a colleague when I was teaching, another member of the PE department. He was a mountain of a man, a great rugby player and a very strong and powerful person to have around. You didn't want to annoy him as he could dispose of most people without any difficulty – as long as someone held his teeth for him! He could strike fear into the heart of an opponent on the rugby field or in the pub car park. And yet when he was dealing with the shy boy who had difficulty with co-ordination in the gym or trying to encourage a nervous goalkeeper or holding his own little baby in his arms, he was the gentlest giant imaginable. He drew together his enormous strength and power with his gentle concern and care. If you ever watch those nature documentaries on television, you'll have seen a great lioness, whose jaws could break an antelopes back, carrying her young in those same jaws without leaving a mark on them.

That's the God we worship and serve, the God in whom we put our trust and reliance. He is a God of awesome power, and a God who can gently and carefully pick us up and surround us with his arms of grace, the God who is described here and in so many other places through the Bible as a gentle shepherd. He knows each of us by name and really does want the best for every one of his people. He will protect us in the difficult times by keeping us close to himself, but also give us freedom to roam as he watches over us in the good times. In him we really do have everything we need.

3. PERMANENT (vv8,28)

Part of the trouble with all this God stuff is that, as he is incomparable and incomprehensible, we try to get a handle on what he's like by comparing him to what we already know. The theologians would call it "anthropomorphising" him, giving him human characteristics because that's what we are most familiar with. Painting the picture of a shepherd is one example of that. It's the same when we refer to him as Father or Redeemer or Lover or whatever. But our experience of other humans can also mean that we have a kind of background fear that he will let us down. After all, many of our fellow human beings in whom we have been encouraged to put our trust have let us down – be they politicians, financiers, fathers, spouses or friends (the list could go on and on depending on our own personal experiences).

But God's not like that. Isaiah says here that he is "*everlasting*" in v28. He's always going to be there for you, always true to that image of the perfect, powerful shepherd. And in v8 he says that, despite the transitory nature of humanity, God will always stick to his word. If he has said he loves us, he always will. If he has promised to help us, that promise will always stand. There are plenty of other images in the Bible which don't rely on human comparison, which attempt to convey that: he is the Rock, the Light which never goes out, his love is like an ever-flowing river. This is a God who will never, ever let you down because he is everlasting and his character, like his word, is unchanging.

Now, as we saw last week, the fact that God is beyond anything we can really describe, because he sees the bigger picture, because he has his purposes worked out in terms of eternity rather than a few weeks or even the span of a human life, we can't always see or appreciate quite what he's doing, but if we trust him, in the end it will all work out for good. St Paul tells us that in *Romans 8:28ff*. It is very much like the sheep with its limited understanding and narrow horizon trusting implicitly the shepherd who tends it. We rely on him and rest in him because we know we can trust him for our eternal future. We can do that even if it seems that everything is going belly up in the short term. I am always amazed by the faith of those three young men who were put into the blazing furnace by Nebuchadnezzar and, as they were being pushed in they declared their faith in God, even though in human terms death was only moments away (*Daniel 3:17,18*). It's an extraordinary expression of faith in an eternal God who would take care of them beyond this life.

If you're in the middle of some crisis right now, then this might be difficult stuff to follow and accept. But think back over your own life and occasions when God has helped you before – this powerful, pastoral, permanent God. Look at the stories of how God helped those who trusted him which are recorded in the Bible. Read the biographies of men and women who have experienced God's amazing help in the past – or in the present, even. It's a question of hanging on in there and trusting God, despite what seems to be happening. He has promised to protect those who trust in him. He has promised to respond to the prayers of those who pray with faith – however small that faith might be. And that promise, that word can be relied on. Maybe this morning you need to turn again to that God and rest in him as he holds you in his arms, carrying you close to his heart, and leads you gently in his ways. Next week, at the carol service, we'll see the lengths to which he went to seal that promise – and once again exclaim with the prophet "*Here is your God!*". But for now, you don't need all the i's dotted and the t's crossed (because, actually, that's impossible), reach out and trust him – the God who is powerful, pastoral and permanent.

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Questions for discussion

1. Is a picture of a God of infinite power an attractive one or not? Why/why not?
2. There are many images of God in the Bible – not only the Shepherd. List some of them. Which one is your favourite and why?
3. How can we avoid projecting on to God our experience of human beings who may have let us down?
4. We seem to be talking about a blind faith in God which might seem very irrational. Is that the case? What can help us in that?
5. The Bible is full of God's promises. Do you have a favourite? Why that one?
6. Look again at *Isaiah 40*. What else can you discover about God in it?