

Isaiah 40 and Luke 1:1-38

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.' <sup>6</sup> A voice says, 'Cry out.' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' 'All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures for ever.' <sup>9</sup> You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!' <sup>10</sup> See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. <sup>11</sup> He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. <sup>12</sup> Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? <sup>13</sup> Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counsellor? <sup>14</sup> Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding? <sup>15</sup> Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. <sup>16</sup> Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. <sup>17</sup> Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. <sup>18</sup> With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? <sup>19</sup> As for an idol, a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. <sup>20</sup> A person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot; they look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple. <sup>21</sup> Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? <sup>22</sup> He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. <sup>23</sup> He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. <sup>24</sup> No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. <sup>25</sup> 'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One. <sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. <sup>27</sup> Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God'? <sup>28</sup> Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. <sup>29</sup> He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. <sup>30</sup> Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; <sup>31</sup> but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

**Luke 1** *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye witnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup> With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. <sup>5</sup> In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. <sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. <sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' <sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.' <sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.' <sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup> When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.'*

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' <sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.' <sup>34</sup> 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' <sup>35</sup> The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.' <sup>38</sup> 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.

We are having a series of 4 Advent talks – the first on hope, then peace, then joy and just before Christmas – love. We've had a lot of Scripture read out this afternoon, most of which will be very familiar.

There are a number of questions to ask about the word "hope". How is it defined? The noun means "a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen". The archaic meaning - the way it is used in the King James Bible, and indeed in verse 31 of Isaiah 40 in the NIV, is "a feeling of trust". As in "our hope is in the Lord". So when Christians speak of "hope" they may well mean more than wanting something to happen, rather they know that it will happen because of their trust in God and in his Word.

In our society today, is there much "hope"? Does "hope" imply more usually to an expectation of something positive happening rather than something negative? When we speak of "hopelessness", then that means hope that may have existed previously has been lost, and nothing good is either expected or likely to happen. Despair being the opposite of hope.

In Isaiah 40, the prophet reveals the nature of God who is loving and cares for Israel, but is so far above humanity that nations are like dust that blows in the wind... here today, gone tomorrow. This passage is read at this time of year because of its reference to John the Baptist... verse 3 *A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'* Verse 5 refers to Jesus, both at his birth and in his life on earth. <sup>5</sup> *And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'* The reason for our hope in the Lord is that what was said 700 years before the time of John the Baptist and Jesus came to pass.

When we look at Luke's first 38 verses we see that God operates on another level to us. The angel tells Zechariah what will happen. John the Baptist grows up to do what was foretold by the angel Gabriel as we see later in the Gospels. Similarly Gabriel visits Mary, and Jesus grows up to do what was foretold. Zechariah and Elizabeth were an old couple overjoyed to have the child they longed for. Mary was probably a teenager with an older boyfriend Joseph, not expecting to be pregnant quite yet before marriage. She accepted what the angel said because she trusted God and she saw the evidence that what Gabriel said was true with her own eyes. <sup>36</sup> *Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.'* Mary's much older relative Elizabeth was six months pregnant. Zechariah who may have been struck dumb, but could write, without doubt had shared with family what had happened.

From these familiar passages what promises of God have you seen fulfilled in your life?

I was a child of promise. Because my parents' first child lived only hours with a heart defect, they were told not to have children. Father had a heart murmur and as a child was not expected to live long, but he made it to 83 by being careful! The Lord told my mother eight years later to have children, and she had four – all without heart defects.

I was born on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1954, a second child as I have an older sister. On 14<sup>th</sup> May 1954, my mother was told by the Lord "You shall call your son's name Peter. He will be like a rock; strong, steadfast, hard and unshakable". She then saw a young man about twenty five – a mixture of father and mother's father, with a serious slightly ironic expression. Me to a tee! My mother was told that her children and children's children would be saved... something all parents would hope for. And both Jonathan and Johanna are firm Christians – praise the Lord. Patricia and I have been blessed by the Lord and we both have put our trust in God – our hope is in the Lord, as promised 2,700 years ago through the prophet Isaiah.

That's the promises fulfilled in my life. What about others?

*Time for sharing*

What promises are you still waiting to see fulfilled? We all hope that the Lord returns soon as the world is in a mess caused by man's greed, selfishness, and pride. But we also know that until all the world has heard the Gospel, it is unlikely to happen. The Gospel is unknown to parts of the world where the rulers will not allow it to be preached. Closer to home, so many have not really heard the Gospel in a way that has had an impact on their thinking. Christmas has become a festivity that doesn't seem to need God or Jesus.

What promises are you expecting to be fulfilled in your life?

*Time for sharing*

How are we to share our hope in the Lord with others when we have opportunity to speak about Jesus as the reason for the season?

*Time for sharing*

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*<sup>29</sup> He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. <sup>30</sup> Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; <sup>31</sup> but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. This is a promise from God – however weak and feeble we may feel, let us be strengthened by the Lord and use what opportunities we have to share Good News this Christmas.*