

In the year 539 BC, Cyrus, the ruler of the Persians, conquered the Babylonians...Babylon where the people of Israel towards the end of OT history had been taken as the most oppressed of slaves.

For the people of Israel Cyrus came as something of a liberator. A relatively benign and tolerant ruler, in the year following conquest Cyrus allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and Judea and resume their customs and traditions, rebuilding their culture in the Promised Land, rebuilding the temple, the axis of their being. Around the time of Cyrus' decree, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words.

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40.1-2)*

Here is a group of prophets we call in the singular Isaiah, caught up perhaps trance like in the courts of heaven, and in the Hebrew plural imperative, are commanded to speak words of comfort, to speak, to tell that the long period of suffering is over, that restoration is at hand, that 'hope' is something they should never lose or indeed in their case never

There can hardly be a person in most churches who can hear or read the first verses of Isaiah 40 without mentally hearing George Frederick Handel's magnificent setting of the Authorized Version of this text. The aria is sung by a tenor...well you can't have everything!
"Comfort ye, my people."

If I was to dispute Handel's theology it might be that the aria though beautiful, and reassuring loses some of the impetus and impetuosity of the Hebrew text... there is a drive and God wanting the prophet to get it done in the text which I suggest is rather hard to reclaim in the aria. Perhaps it should be a heavy bass who sings it but slightly lower!... but I wouldn't want to push that!

Of course for the Christian, the text points us to a more eternal settling of accounts, an eternal kingdom which shall never fall, or be taken over by a foreign power... the Kingdom of God in Christ.

The hope of resettlement and restoration for the people of Israel of course was realised, but again for the people in that place, it was all too transient. First the Greeks and then the Romans were the great powers who threw the nation back into turmoil... their faithfulness became yet again as the morning mist and their hope seemed to fade, and right up until the time of Jesus they were never far from being under the cosh of a foreign power.

The hope of the people of Israel was at best fragile and often shattered.

But for us in Christ we should always live every day with the sense of hope, the sense that God in Christ can break into every situation however dire.

Schindler' List...Sabbath...candle of Hope expired.

Auschwitz...Maximillian Kolbe...

How often though do we look for that hope and indeed live that hope. As God breaks into the world as a whole on that first Christmas Day, he is able to break into every situation of life.... All we need to do is to realise that fact, look for him and find him.

But how many people also hear in their heads Johannes Brahms' setting of verse 7: "The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it..." Brahms set Isaiah's words for his moving *German Requiem* that premiered in Dresden in 1868.

The two settings could not be more different. Handel's setting of the words "Comfort ye, my people" is tender, sweet, and lyrical. Brahms' setting of "the grass withers, the flower fades" is rugged and stern. Handel's music lulls and soothes us with its message of profound comfort; Brahms' music is a chilling but necessary reminder of our mortality. Yet, there was one inspiration for both composers: Isaiah's words spoken to Jewish exiles in faraway Babylon.

The Jewish exiles in Babylon needed comfort, for they knew all too well that human flesh was as weak and frail as the grass and flowers that briefly flourished on the Judean hillsides before being blasted and withered by the hot, dry winds. Like the scorching sirocco they had seen the Babylonian chariots sweep down on them. They had seen Jerusalem and Solomon's great temple burn like so much dry grass. And like dry straw scattered in the wind they had been scattered; some of them had gone into exile in Egypt, most had been taken by the enemy to Babylon. What they had not yet seen was this "comfort" of which Isaiah spoke.

Because we are Christians, we are not anaesthetised from the trials of life... there are times when we feel that our weakness and frailty of faith is in danger of simply being blown away in sirocco like winds; times when we want to stop the 'merry go round' of the Church and simply say: 'Lord enough is enough!'

Brahms though for me has it exactly right. There is the sense of enduring patience through the withering and fading which seems musically seems to go on for ever with very little respite...the musical tension is built up and up until you think you will burst. Conducting same I always had to rein the choir and orchestra in... no crescendos which were not in the score...wait be patient... hope... and then...

....then in a massive B flat major chord and fortissimo, the phrase 'the word of the Lord endures for ever' is sounded and a huge vocal fugue begins, assuring the soul that in the end God brings his will to fruition in glory and splendour. Now choir now let it go!

So Mr Handel, beautiful music..., but for me Mr Brahms has at the very least an edge bringing to the human soul the feeling of eternal hope, eternal victory, and eternal salvation which we see in the Christ who is to come... all those things actually brought to fruition!