

Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11

'Console my people, console them' says your God. 'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call to her that her time of service is ended, that her sin is atoned for, that she has received from the hand of the Lord double punishment for her crimes.'

A voice cries, 'Prepare in the wilderness a way for the Lord. Make a straight highway for our God across the desert. Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low, let every cliff become a plain, and the ridges a valley; then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all mankind shall see it; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

Go up on a high mountain, joyful messenger to Zion. Shout with a loud voice, joyful messenger to Jerusalem. Shout without fear, say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God.'

Here is the Lord coming with power, his arm subduing all things to him. The prize of his victory is with him, his trophies all go before him. He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes.

Psalms 103: 1-2, 3-4, 24-25, 27-30. R. v. 1

Oh, bless the Lord, my soul!

**Titus 2: 11-14; 3: 4-7**

God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our worldly ambitions; we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world, while we are waiting in hope for the blessing which will come with the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free from all wickedness and to purify a people so that it could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good.

When the kindness and love of God our saviour for mankind were revealed, it was not because he was concerned with any righteous actions we might have done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by

renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our saviour. He did this so that we should be justified by his grace, to become heirs looking forward to inheriting eternal life.

Luke 3: 15-16, 21-22

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

Now when all the people had been baptised and while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.'

Reflection

Isaiah's prophecy is a cry of vindication that God has not forgotten God's people. The people are to rejoice at the coming of their Saviour God who gathers them like lambs into his arms. This is such a tender and gentle image that made perfect sense to the people of Jesus' time. It is a little harder for many of us who are so removed from the seeming simplicity of country life. But there is a bite to what Isaiah is saying here, vindication comes *only* after the people have paid *twice* for their sin. It would be very hard to be reconciled to the gentle shepherd image at the end of Isaiah's piece were we to be left with only this message.

Our true consolation is found in the Gospel. Here we find another idyllic scene that sees Jesus baptised by John in the Jordan. John is only too aware of how unworthy he is using water for baptism. He knows that Jesus has a much greater baptism to give. But it is not only baptism that Jesus gives. It is through God's own beloved Son that we are vindicated without paying any penalty for our sins. But there is still more—not only does Jesus pay for our sins, he also gives us the Holy Spirit to be the fire that keeps us in God's presence. Truly, our God is great indeed!