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Peace: Longing for Home
Isaiah 40:1-11
December 6, 2020

We just watched a recent film, ***Midway***, the story of the naval battle between Japan and the U.S in the Pacific. The film portrays in amazingly vivid scenes the human carnage as well as the heroism of soldiers during the three days that changed the war in the Pacific. It followed the horrendous scenes of death and destruction following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. What remains with us after watching this film is the sheer scale of human death and destruction that war inflicts on us.

Some of you may also have seen the 1998 movie, ***Saving Private Ryan***, for which Tom Hanks received an Oscar. Again, you shudder at the sheer waste of human lives, and the sacrifice men made amid the mud and cold of that winter of 1944.

There are moments in this drama when heaven finally seems to come close. Amid the noise and brutality of war there are interludes of peace. One such moment comes just after the most terrifying battle in which many are killed or torn apart by shells and bullets. The exhausted men sit in a village church listening to a choir brought in to sing for them. It is almost as if heaven has kissed earth again. The voices soar upwards and you can feel the spirits of the men being renewed, their humanity recovered, if only for a few hours. Peace is especially sweet for those who have seen war's terrifying face.

The recipients of Isaiah's preaching during the exile in Babylon had also experienced the cost of war and the loss that attends it. Their

religious, social and political world had been turned upside down by the super power of the day. They were now exiles from their homeland and their traditions. It must have felt that God no longer cared about them. Into this sense of hopelessness Isaiah brings a message from God that promises a new beginning. *In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.* Judah's suffering is over and their sins have been paid. For too long they had ignored their God, chased after other gods and forgot the covenant forged at Sinai. Perhaps now they are ready to return home!

There is nothing worse surely than losing a sense of who we are or the confusion that results from a loss of centre. This is what happens to us when we drift from faith. Perhaps there are some of us who are going through difficult times, enough to confuse us and make us wonder if God really cares. Perhaps conflict in relationships, at home or work, are causing us confusion and heartache. If so, we need to capture this amazing picture that Isaiah paints here. Look at it! Amid the wilderness of hills and valleys that seems impassable, a straight, smooth path is being built. God is going to be on this highway preparing a way for us to come home. The message of Isaiah to us today is that God takes the initiative to forge these new beginnings for us. God too longs for our homecoming, for our being centred in God's love and grace. In the presence of this amazing God all our enemies, all our trials, all our despair, are leveled so that we are free to look upon our lives with different eyes and with new hope.

When we were in Egypt just over 20 years ago we went to the temple of Karnak, the largest temple of worship in the world. There once every year the priests would process the god around the city and back into the temple. God went on a tour of his capital. Here in Isaiah 40 a processional is being prepared in the midst of the wilderness. Only this is the procession of the God of all creation who cannot be bound by time or buildings. Gail and I saw this small holy place at Karnak where the god sat. From the towering entrance into the temple, you are able to look down a long corridor through the centre of the temple to the resting place of the god. Isaiah's vision is much

grander. Here God is the Lord of the cosmos and is in process of ordering the history of nations.

What is the basis of hope and peace here in the prophet's message to the exiles and to us? The prophet reminds us who we are in comparison to God's eternity and power. He says that we are like grass which grows, fades and dies. Unlike us, however, God's word is eternal. Even the mighty Babylon, or whatever empire of the world you might want to name since then, every one of them have their limits. What we must understand is that God is working at a cosmic level and is moving all history to its terminal point. This is the prophet's reminder to us today. Neither Washington, London, Berlin, Tokyo nor Moscow, will determine the course of history. Ultimately, says the prophet here to the exiles and to us today, it is God's working within the stream of events that determines our destiny. God's will and word are sovereign.

At our personal level of exile and despair and anxiety the door to freedom and peace is to capture this vision and make it ours. The prophet reminds us, as if we needed reminding, that we are fragile, limited, burdened with finitude and, like the grass that withers and dies, we face our mortality with some fear and dread.

The way we are taught by the world to deal with this inner disquiet is to silence it by drowning ourselves in life. We become masters of obsessions and additions; we try to distance ourselves from our inner selves by cranking up the volume from outside ourselves, whatever distractions will help us find peace

As I read somewhere recently, our greatest weakness in the West today is our failure to connect with our inner selves, to know ourselves. I am convinced that, especially in males today, the reason church is so awkward for us males is our genuine fear of inner discovery. We are afraid of finding out too much about ourselves. We would rather pour our energy into externals than face the pain self discovery. Ultimately, knowledge of self and God work in tandem.

These ancient Hebrews felt a yearning for home. In some strange sense that same inner yearning stirs in each of us. Finding that inner

peace with God and self is at the heart of our hope and peace. To be exiled from God is to be, in some sense, at odds with oneself.

Note the final image here by the prophet. The God who comes to us is no harsh tyrant, or punitive judge, or cranky schoolmaster. The God who levels the hills and valleys of our lives is mighty to be sure. He is after all the Creator. But side by side with this image of pure power is one of gentle shepherd who leans down to pluck us up, as a shepherd would a lamb, and draw us lovingly to his breast where he cuddles us to life. *He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.* This is the one who calls to us today, the Sovereign and Shepherd!

Amen