

A Few Words About Hope from Isaiah 40

By Dr. Dave Neale

Our text for today is from Isaiah 40:3-5.

A voice cries out: "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.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

We Christians know a thing or two about hope. It stands at the centre of what our spiritual life is all about. Hope is woven into the fabric of every biblical story, and these stories guide us in our faith.

So, as we prepare to hear the Cantata with its themes of hope and light, let me give you an example from the season.

Lest we become rather too romantic about the birth of Jesus, we recall that the words of Isaiah for the morning were spoken to a people banished into exile, very much like the small family that traveled from town to town with the young Messiah in their care. The people of Isaiah's day were beset by taxation, foreign occupation, exile, famine and the dissolution of home and country. Some of you know what that is like.

The young Holy Family was forced into itinerancy...because of *taxation and foreign dominance*.ⁱ

In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.... Says Isaiah, indeed...

After the birth the family probably lived in Bethlehem for a couple of years, I say that because the Gospel of Matthew remarks that the wise men visited the baby in a "house"ⁱⁱ. *Oikos* in Greek. The word for manger is different (*phatnē*) – only used by Luke in the Bible.

That it was *Bethlehem* where Jesus was born and raised in those first few years is extremely important. You will recall that Bethlehem was the home of David, the great king of Israel from whom Jesus' lineage comes. Of David it was said in 2 Samuel that: ***Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.*** (2 Samuel 7:16)

You will recall the words of Micah: ***But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient of days.*** (Micah 4:2)

The Holy Family was then driven into *exile and deprivations*, again into no one knows where in the deserts of Egypt by political threats against the young child's life. ***In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD....*** Says Isaiah, indeed...

After sojourning in exile for years in Egypt, they returned to rebuild their lives yet again in Nazareth.

This is no romantic tale. This is real life! So, we understand what it means to hope in the midst of real-life circumstance. To understand this makes the glories of which we are about to sing all the more meaningful.

Isn't it arresting that the incarnation of the Son of God was in a context that any modern refugees from political oppression or war can understand? Isn't it amazing that God sent his Son into the maelstrom of human history?

So, you see, we who hold the faith in our hearts recognize that the crooks in the path, the valleys, the hills, the pot holes are real along the way. But these conditions will be, for the hopeful, made passable by our faith in God.

Make the desert path straight... let the valleys be lifted, the mountains leveled the uneven ground smooth.

Then... Isaiah tells us, ***then...*** we will see the glory of the Lord revealed. Everybody's going to see it together. Oh happy day that will be.

Please remember as you listen, that none of this is rational or reasonable. We don't assert that its rational or reasonable. Our faith operates way beyond these mere human spheres.

But this highway of hope and light is something that we can only experience if we engage in the fullness of emotions as well as our finite minds. And that is why we turn to music.

So, listen and just allow the hope to rise in your hearts, allow the way to be made passable by your faith.

ⁱ Only Luke asserts they were from Nazareth, Matthew assumes they were residents of Bethlehem; But John 7:41-42 indicates his home in Galilee was widely known. Many apparently knew nothing of the Bethlehem residence. Otherwise, neither Mark nor John has a single word about the life of Jesus before about 30 years of age.

ⁱⁱ The wisemen visit the family in a "house" in Bethlehem (οικος, Matthew 2:11); compare the birth in Luke where the child is ... ***laid him in a manger*** (φάτνη, "a stall, stable, feeding place" Luke 2:7, 12, 16; 13:15). Matthew does not know that the young family were from Nazareth at all, not any details of the birth, other than that the child was born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:1).