

Words of comfort and hope

What are our main needs as we face the New Year? The answer to this question can be very varied, but most likely it includes three words: **comfort**, **hope** and **new strength**. There is a lot of accumulated fatigue, a lot of pain, a lot of uncertainty. We need to refresh our strength along the way both personally and as a community.

Isaiah chapter 40 is a memorable passage filled with comfort and steeped in hope that speaks of and for the weary, the heartbroken, and those in need of hope. In this text we find the best luggage for the year that begins and, at the same time, a triple reason to give thanks. It reveals what it is that comforts us, why we have hope, and concludes with a vigorous promise of new strength. In each of these three aspects one of the persons of the Trinity stands out:

- Christ, the essence of our consolation
- God, the guarantee of our hope
- The Holy Spirit, the source of our strength

The coming of Christ, the essence of our consolation (v. 1-9)

«Comfort, comfort my people» (Isa. 40:1 NIV).

What an impressive opening note! It is the gateway to one of the most glorious sections of Scripture, the songs of the Suffering Servant¹ and, above all, it is the proclamation of the most transcendental event in History: the coming of Christ to the world. It is not surprising that Händel was inspired precisely by these words to start his famous composition “Messiah”.

Notice how the resounding opening words -«Comfort, comfort»- are followed by the prophetic announcement of the coming of Jesus as Messiah. This event would eventually set an expiry date on suffering and death. Can there be any greater consolation?

The **coming** of Jesus is **double**: Christ came the first time, Christmas; Christ will come again in glory, the *Parousia*; and meanwhile Christ is with us «every day unto the end of the world» (Matt. 28:20 KJV). This presence of Christ transforms everything. There is a *before* Christ and an *after* Christ not only in the calendar of history but also in the calendar of our lives.

¹ The so-called “Servant Songs” are a series of four poems in the book of Isaiah (chapters 42 to 53) that prophetically describe the character and work of Jesus 800 years in advance.

The text shows us four aspects of this prophetic message. In fact, it is an authentic **Gospel in miniature** (not by chance the book of Isaiah is called the “fifth Gospel” and Isaiah “the evangelical prophet”).

It's a community message

The words are addressed to **the people of God**. Consolation is not only an individual experience, but a communal one. It is important to remember it today when the rampant individualism of our society entangles us. **Faith is a personal experience, but not individualistic, we are saved individually, but we live faith in community.** The living out of Christianity is inseparable from the *ecclesia* (assembly or gathering of believers).

The Gospel is the power of God for *my* salvation (Rom. 1:16), it gives me life and changes *my* life (John 10:10), but it is also the power of God to form a people for *Himself*. We cannot forget this double vision lest we fall into a utilitarian faith that only seeks to relieve my personal problems and needs.

It's a message of forgiveness

«Proclaim that her sin has been paid for» (Isa. 40:2 NIV).

The Gospel begins with an experience of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. It is the first step. That is why it has to reach the heart, the conscience. The expression «speak to the heart» (Isa. 40:2 YLT) is the same one used when Joseph spoke to his brothers also in a context of forgiveness and reconciliation. **The reality of sin and the need for forgiveness made the coming of Christ essential**, «for there is one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus» (1 Tim. 2:5 NIV).

It's a transcendent message

What is at stake is not only our life here, but our eternal destiny. Hence the vivid description of the transience of life: «...all people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever» (Isa. 40:6-8 NIV).

James and Peter quote this text in two separate passages (Jas. 1:10-11; 1 Pet. 1:24-25) endorsing the seriousness of the subject. The brevity of our lives leads us to think of the afterlife, the eternal life. We are facing a transcendental and, therefore, urgent message.

It's an urgent message

The proclamation of the coming of Jesus is imperative, a priority. Up to four times (vs. 2, 3, 6 and 9) expressions of urgency are used: «proclaim», «call», «cry out», «lift up your voice with a shout». It is a compelling message because it is **good news of salvation**. The term «herald of good news» (Isa. 40:9 ESV), is used twice in this verse, and it means to evangelize: «o Zion, evangelizer of good news... o Jerusalem, evangelizer of good news». It is a foretaste of Jesus' mandate of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19).

The prophetic announcement of the coming of Christ reveals to us the glory and power of God. That is why the text now naturally moves to us the greatness of our God.

The character of God, the guarantee of our hope (v. 10-29)

«Behold your God!» (Isa. 40:9 NKJV)

Comfort is the first word in the text, but we have a second need: hope. The entire passage is permeated with hope and distills hope. Comfort and hope are inseparable, they form a pair. **To console is to give hope and to give hope is to console**. In the New Testament we see the close relationship between the two: «Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us **eternal comfort and good hope** through grace» (2 Thess. 2:16 ESV).

Our comfort is eternal and our hope is good because it is founded on **the character of God**. It is a hope that «does not put us to shame», does not disappoint, because it does not depend on us but on «God's love that has been poured out into our hearts» (Rom. 5:5 NIV).

All this is possible because we have **a great God**. «Behold your God!». Three traits appear constantly intertwined in the text. Let the force of the Word speak for itself:

God is the Creator

«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?» (Isa. 40:12 NIV).

«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» (Isa. 40:26 NIV).

God is the Sovereign

«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. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing» (Isa. 40:22-23 NIV).

«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» (Isa. 40:28 NIV).

God is Shepherd and Sustainer

«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» (Isa. 40:11 NIV).

«He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak» (Isa. 40:29 NIV).

This Almighty God, Lord and Shepherd, is **the guarantee** of our consolation and our hope.

New strength, the result of our hope (v. 28-31)

«Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength» (Isa. 40:31 NKJV).

So far we have seen the reason for our consolation, Christ, and the guarantee of our hope, the sovereign God. But the passage concludes with a key idea that corresponds to the third need and reason for gratitude: **new strength**.

God's pastoral heart is poured out throughout the text, but especially in these last few verses where He concludes the message with a practical application. The comfort of Christ and the hope of God are not just theoretical, mere theological concepts; they have immediate effects on the believer: new strength, they renew us. Here it is the Holy Spirit who plays an outstanding role as Paul reminds us: «If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you» (Rom. 8:11 NKJV).

The life-giving effect of the Spirit will reach its maximum expression with our resurrection; but it already manifests itself here and now, strengthening us in our daily walk. It is interesting that the renewal of our strength is described in a triple metaphor:

- Flying: «they will soar on wings like eagles»
- Running: «they will run and not grow weary»
- Walking: «they will walk and not be faint»

It is not a single experience, but a diverse one: there are periods in which we are able to fly on spiritual heights; other times we run firmly, and there are more difficult moments in which we can only walk, in all three experiences there is movement. It doesn't matter if you can only walk, the danger is in being stopped, stagnant.

This diversity can also refer to different types of persons. Our spirituality varies according to factors of temperament, learning, personal experiences, culture, etc. We have to learn to accept each other because in the body of Christ not everyone flies nor everyone runs, but everyone must walk.

The apostle Paul, in his spiritual testament to Timothy, tells him: «be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus» (2 Tim. 2:1 ESV). The meaning of the verb² is “be strengthened”, “become strong” in the grace of Christ. **The source of our strength does not lie in ourselves**, our resilience or abilities as humanism claims, **but in the One who is within us**, Christ. It is not a natural fortitude but a supernatural one.

Certainly the Gospel gives us words of comfort and hope like nothing and no one can give us, words that renew our strength throughout the year and every day of our lives. They are words of abundant life and eternal life.

«Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word» (2 Thess. 2:16-17 ESV).

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² The verb is in the imperative of the middle-passive voice, not in the active one. This indicates that Timothy cannot give himself this power.