



## The Sovereign Lord Comes Isaiah 40:1-11

On Friday, Rhiannon and I decided to go for a picnic lunch on the beach at Holkham. As many of you will know, the main parking area is on the huge tree lined avenue that stretches from the dunes up to Holkham Hall. What I hadn't realized was that it continues though the dunes to the sea where there once was a harbour. Over the years the dunes have encroached and the harbour filled but in its heyday, the Earl of Leicester could arrive at Holkham in his ship and be welcomed by this tree lined avenue up to the hall. He didn't have to scramble over the dunes - there was a road built through them and over the marshes and into a gentle slope up to the main gate. His servants and tenants could line the way welcoming him if he had done something worthy for the government or the king.

If you remember from our last sermon two weeks ago I drew out a similar picture from French motorways. If we want a highway that is easy to drive along, then we make it wide, straight and level. To do this we build embankments, cut cuttings, construct viaducts and bore tunnels.

Why do I say this? Because the picture is the same in our reading. In Isaiah we get the message - God is coming - so make the way easy for Him to return to Jerusalem and take up His rightful place. Let's look at that wording more closely: *A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5 (C) And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

To the Jews in Babylon this was an important prophecy. Their exile as to end and they were to return. As I mentioned last time, this prophecy can be worked in a number of ways because it gives us a basic scriptural principle that applies to God's people and will continue until Jesus returns bodily - and that is our God is One who is of restoration and second chances. To those who were prepared to trust and obey, He would take back to Zion where He would be exalted again. And that's what happened. It has been the same for the church down two millennia. God's people, the church fall, but experience periods of awakening where massive expressions of the power of the Holy Spirit occur such that many come to Christ. We've had frequent awakenings (or revivals) over the centuries either in the UK or in parts of Britain.

Now down the years in 2006, we cry out to God for a new awakening. Britain has never been in a worse spiritual state - certainly not for hundreds of years. Now the signs of new shoots and of dawn coming are starting to appear - even here in Norfolk and I believe that God wants us to respond to them.

You've heard me say this many times before and perhaps you wonder why I repeat it. If revival is coming, why are things so dire in Britain, in Norfolk or to be more specific, in Swaffham. If there is an awakening coming, then we don't see much sign here. The same words were presented to the Babylonian exiles. Some received them joyfully and prepared. Others pooh-poohed them - and probably never saw the blessings. We do know of all the descendants of the exiles who ended up in Babylon, not all returned to Jerusalem. Why should they, the synagogues of Babylon were fine, so why go to the ruins of Jerusalem and work for next to nothing on some old ruined temple? They were comfortable.

Isaiah's words are not unique to him. These were repeated by all the exilic and post exilic prophets - God was coming get ready! Be prepared! And down the years this prophecy has stood as a rallying cry - through John the Baptist until now. I was asked last time if when I said "The Lord is coming" if I was referring to the Second Coming. You may apply the prophecy in that way and it will be so for its last use. But this is about our God returning to his rightful position amongst a people, amongst a church where decline has occurred because people have though their sin, separated themselves in various ways from God. As I've said, down the ages the church has received the call and then we

see the people of God awakened and the power of the Spirit of God poured out.

But look carefully at the words in verses 3 and 4. Here we see the picture of the Lord coming but it isn't the Lord who sends in the bulldozers, it's the people welcoming Him who are the ones that make the highway. They hear the word of God, they see the signs and in faith lay the road to make that entry smoother. And here we have this call "The Lord is coming! Be prepared".

That's kind of how I left it last time. How do we prepare for the Lord's coming. We don't see it yet. Do we focus on our own problems as a church? Do we look inward and think we will do something about it? Or do we build the roads in expectation? The evidence is from past awakenings in Britain is that it was the minority which kept the faith and built in expectation who God was able to use.

I remember a few years ago that Rhiannon and I went to Majorca for a holiday. We went to the resort of Palma Nova which was popular in those days. But we couldn't help noticing that behind the hotels were a series of roads with pavements and street lighting but with no houses or villas. Why? They were in excellent condition. The reason was that the local authority in Palma wanted new development to come to them and bring prosperity to their town. The prosperity came to most coastal towns in Majorca, but it was the ones who prepared where the ones who benefited most from the harvest.

We are entering into a challenging period in the life of our fellowship. We can either pull down the shutters and weather the storm, or stand with those in our country who prepare the way of the Lord.

So how do we prepare the way. I'd suggest in this chapter there are four areas that we must pray and prepare into:

#### ● Seek the Eternal

*A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. 7 The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."*

Life is frail. We are compared to grass. It has its season and then it dies. But the word of the Lord stands forever. When we understand that perspective, we know that we deal with the eternal perspective. Yes, God can and does change lives now, but the short time we have on earth is nothing compared to what's in store for an eternity. When oh when will the people of God stop building treasure on earth and start building it in heaven? When, oh when, will we understand that those who leave the world without Christ leave without hope?

John the Baptist went into the desert and cried out about the frailty of life and the constancy of an eternal God. And the people responded in repentance. How do we respond?

For many believers in the county, it has been through linking with others of right mind. First Friday is one way this has happened. It's an opportunity to come together in unity and pray together. More church fellowships than ever are now involved. But it is still a minority. Another expression is Prayer in the Park in Norwich.

Flesh is frail. Grass is frail. How do we invest in eternity. It starts in God's presence and by working and praying with others committed to open up the highway of our God.

#### ● Proclaim the coming.

*You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"*

God is coming - let people know. Like I say, people often look in terms of the Lord's first coming, or His second. For the Jews first reading this, they were looking forward to God's return to an re-opened temple in Jerusalem. It wasn't a bodily return at that time, but a return of the presence of God to the temple. For us now, calling for revival - an awakening - is a call for the return of the

presence of God by His Spirit . Yes, I know He's already here, but the presence of God was with His people then. But there's a big difference between now and in revival where the only way to describe the activity of the Spirit is as a burning fire that breaks out just where He wills.

So if He's coming, then let's open our mouth and cry out. It's quite ironic in a way. We are called to cry out and the main reason that we see the church in ruins is that we have not cried out and left others to do it. There were no others. It was our job. We were the witnesses that never witnessed. *You who bring good tidings to Norfolk, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Norfolk, "Here is your God!"* Do we want to improve the highway? Do we want to open it up in the desert - then tell people about Jesus. Make a difference.

### Celebrate His Greatness

*See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.*

"Yeah but...no, but" so the "girl" in Little Britain says. We see great triumphant phrases like this in Scripture. We read in Psalms how great God is. But do our lives and does our church reflect the Sovereign God who comes with power?

Norfolk - the graveyard of preachers. "Nothing ever happens in Norfolk" "Norfolk is a hard place". Where isn't? Let's give up belittling God shall we? We shouldn't be singing and reading about *the Sovereign LORD comes with power* and then telling everyone what He's not doing or can't do. We know why God isn't seen in power in Norfolk. It's because of the sin and disobedience of His people. People who have forgotten His power, His holiness and His commands. If that's the case, they may like to try to rationalize their way around the bit about His reward and His recompense accompanying Him!

Let's bring the Scripture and the reality together in our lives. If He is really *the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.* Then get serious about Him. Because if He is this sort of God, then we should welcome and expect His coming in power. They don't seem to have too many problems with it in Poland or Romania, or Brazil, or Korea, or Ghana and all the rest of the places where revival has broken out.

Let's give up on selling God short, come in repentance and expect a God who had power and authority - and a God who brings reward and recompense. One day, those preparing the road will have their reward. The question is; are we going to be among that number, or are we still languishing in Babylon?

### Recognize who you are

*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.*

The great thing about Isaiah 40 is the positive note it finishes on. This is a very strong encouragement to trust in a God who vindicates Himself and His people. He is a God who is going to break through all the depression and mediocrity amongst His people and rule and reign. He wants us to be part of this because He lives us and gently cares for us.

Maybe you feel a little battered as a believer at the moment. Maybe you struggle with faith, or health or life. Maybe you look at situations in the church and feel this is about as good as it's going to get. The church has taken a few steps forward and gone back before. That's just history. This is Norfolk Yes it does, but only when God's people take Him seriously. it comes when we recognise God's ways in God's word and act on them. Prepare a highway. OK, let's prepare that highway. Let's get our lives into perspective. Lets pray with others, let's proclaim the message. Let's give up our small version of God, repent and follow the Sovereign Lord who comes with power and His arm rules for Him! Let's follow and receive that care!