

'New things I declare...' (Isaiah 42:9). *Of all the prophetic visions in the Old Testament, this section of Scripture is arguably the greatest – and certainly the most influential – in terms of setting the scene for the coming Messiah. As we explore this wonderful text over the next thirty days, may the Lord give us a new (or re-newed!) vision of God's great salvation, and our glorious Saviour.*

Day 1 – Isaiah 40:1-5 'A voice of one calling'

Our family always enjoy the amazing wildlife series on the BBC – I'm sure many of you do, too. The latest series – Planet Earth III – featured a sequence in the Namib Desert with a family of ostriches. Mum and Dad Ostrich were incubating a number of eggs which hatched, but the ferocity of the desert sun forced them to move on before all the chicks had arrived. They left with several hatchlings, but as the family disappeared into the distance, one egg suddenly started to crack. Another newborn – all alone!

If you're familiar with these series, you'll know about the gut-wrenching drama that attends them. In this case the chick was soon on its feet, but unless it could be reunited with the group it would quickly die. Cue the 'voice of one calling'! Newborn ostrich chicks, it turns out, have a surprisingly loud cry. For a heart-stopping period the chick totters round the desert, calling out while Mum and Dad apparently take no notice – but eventually they halt, and one of them turns back while the other guards the chick's siblings. A few minutes later the latecomer joins the family, who saunter off nonchalantly into the shimmering haze.

It's great drama, but it strikes to the heart of today's iconic passage. We're beginning a new series in the wonderful section of Isaiah, chapters 40-55; God's people are in the midst of a torrid time – judged, conquered, exiled, traumatised. How would they survive? Where was hope? How would things be turned around?

'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.' (v1) Into the harsh realities of life in 6th-century Babylon (and for this series it doesn't matter if these prophecies were first uttered by Isaiah more than a century earlier, or by a successor during the time of their exile, their meaning is the same – we'll leave the authorship debate to the theologians), Isaiah speaks a word of hope, of deliverance, and of comfort. There will come a time of renewal: God's people's 'hard service has been completed... her sin has been paid for.' (v2)

And the herald of this hope is 'a voice of one calling in the wilderness: "Prepare the way for the Lord."' (v3) Very few of us like 'desert times' – we don't choose them, we endure them. We wish they had never happened, and wonder how soon they will end. But many of us also know that, looking back, *God does much of his best work in deserts*; seasons when things are stripped away and all we can do is trust.

You may be experiencing such a time now – let today's passage give you hope. God spoke into the desert season of his people then – he will speak and ultimately bring renewal now. Or if, thankfully, it is not such a time for you, perhaps today take a moment to reflect on how the Lord brought you out of your last such time, and pray for those who are experiencing it now. For, remarkably, it is in the desert that 'the glory of the Lord will be revealed.' (v5) Amen.

Day 2 – Isaiah 40:6-11 'Close to his heart'

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' Probably the best-known verse of scripture, almost certainly the most loved. The shepherd plays a pivotal role in the imagery and theology of the bible, and is one that many people still return to, even today. And yet, most of us don't know an actual, real-life shepherd – and even if we do, a modern-day shepherd in 21st century Western Europe bears little resemblance to a shepherd in ancient Israel.

No lush pastures or hedged fields. Grazing land was scarce (the best land was used to grow crops) – 'green pasture' meant clumps of grass on rocky hillsides, scavenged systematically over miles of walking each day, as the shepherd guided his flock on the 'right paths'. 'Still water' was even rarer.

And yet, for all that the image of the biblical shepherd appears to us dimly through the mists of time and context, it remains precious, and symbolises so much of what we seek from the Lord: protection, provision, active guidance, care, faithfulness, selfless leadership. 'Shepherd' is shorthand for all of these wonderful blessings; and so, scripture repeatedly returns to this image for the Lord, as it does in today's prophetic vision.

Yesterday the prophet declared a word of comfort and renewal; today, he earths that word in one of the great biblical images: the Shepherd – the ultimate comforter, and, for his flock, the source of daily renewal. And let's notice how the rest of the passage – whilst not mentioning the shepherd – implicitly echoes the sort of qualities we seek in the ideal shepherd: faithfulness (v8 – especially given our human fickleness (vv6-7) – 'silly sheep!'); leadership (v9), strength (v10), and ultimately loving care, as the divine shepherd 'tends his flock' (v11).

Most striking of all, perhaps, is the intimacy of this relationship. This divine Shepherd 'carries [his lambs] close to his heart' (v11). What a lovely picture that is! Hundreds of years later, the divine Good Shepherd-made-flesh referenced this very verse, in his famous story of the shepherd who finds the lost sheep and 'joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home' (Luke 15:5-6).

Today, know that God carries you close to his heart. He is not distant, or deaf to your cries – he gathers you in his arms, and gently leads you on your journey, carrying you home. If that seems hard to believe, pray for grace to receive this reality in a new way. And if, deep down, you know this to be true – give thanks, and pray for grace to stay close to the Lord's heart today.

Day 3 – Isaiah 40:12-26 'Our incomparable God'

Many years ago, I went on a school trip to Hampton Court Palace. I remember very little about it, but studying King Henry VIII as an adult gave me a greater insight into the mystique of earthly royal power, embodied in a palace such as this. It was Henry's usual seat of government, and typically attended by up to 1,000 courtiers daily. Access to the king was strictly controlled: first there was the courtyard – then the Great Hall for more distinguished guests. From the Great Hall you entered the Guard Chamber – and finally, only the most elite, or those with permission to conduct urgent business, would be allowed from the Guard Chamber into the Privy Chamber, where the King would be sat under a royal canopy.

To approach the king, you had at all times to face towards him (never turn your back on the monarch) and inch forward slowly, legs bent, head bowed in order to present your business to the king... It's a striking scene, isn't? The great monarch, wielding absolute power. And I could have picked any number of great courts, from any period of global history, to illustrate the point.

And yet, as we turn to today's passage, here's is God's view of all of them: (v24) 'He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.' However magnificent they appear, however powerful or intimidating, the same end awaits them all. However hard they try they cannot, in the end, take the glory that belongs to God alone.

As Isaiah 40 continues, today the perspective changes, and God takes centre stage – if there were any doubt as to whether we can trust these messages of hope and renewal which began this amazing prophetic vision, then here's our answer. We can trust the one who makes them, because *look at who this God is* – look at his power and authority: 'Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?' (v12)

That's quite a good start to this passage, which reminds us, again and again, of the incomparable character and splendour of the Lord Almighty. To any human ruler with puffed up notions of their magnificence, you can imagine the Lord saying – you call that a royal court...? Now *this* is a royal court...: '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.' (v22)

The point, ultimately, is simple: *there is no-one like our God*. Our God is greater, our God is stronger, this God is higher than any other. 'To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal,' says the Lord. As we gaze out on a chaotic world, still marred and scarred by the ego of human rulers, how we need to hear this word again. Yes, they may have their seasons in the sun – but their season always ends. When King Henry died, he was no longer a glorious prince but a brutal tyrant, whose population were desperate to see him go.

Whatever challenges and troubles we face today, whatever we offer to God in prayer for our world, take heart from this passage. Our God reigns – there is simply no-one like Him. Amen!

Day 4 – Isaiah 40:27-31 'Those who hope'

One of the assemblies I take into the local primary schools in Advent features a 'hope-o-meter'. I get the children to think about the idea of hope – what it means, what they hope for, why it matters. The hope-o-meter invites them to think about how much they hope for different things, of varying levels of importance: that I will get all the Christmas presents I want this year, that I will be taller next year (that one really matters!), that I will be more kind next year, and so on.

As we think about what hope is, it's fascinating to see how hope is such a flexible word in our culture, ranging from little more than wishful thinking all the way up to a deep longing. What do you hope for? How do you understand hope? Today's passage reminds us that, for a follower of Jesus, hope is more than even a deep longing – biblical hope is a confident expectation, because it rests upon the 'everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.' (v28)

But it's never easy. 'A decision for hope is a decision for frustration,' reflected one wise biblical commentator. Hoping involves waiting – and very few of us like waiting. Indeed, the old translation of verse 31 ('those who hope in the Lord') is 'they who *wait upon* the Lord.' Hoping = waiting, much of the time.

Certainly, God's people were tired of waiting, in the context of this prophecy. Judged, conquered and exiled, their constant lament was: 'when will this end? When will God come to rescue us?' And the prophet gently challenges this, doesn't he, offering them three reasons not to give up:

First, God doesn't get tired like we do – which is a relief for those of us who definitely tire more easily than we used to! Second, God's wisdom is greater than ours: (v28) 'His understanding no-one can fathom.' We may not understand God's working in our lives at a particular season – but we can trust that he works all things for good for those who love him.

Finally, he gives strength to those who, even in weariness, continue to hope. It is those who hope in the Lord who 'renew their strength' (v31). For those who can only walk, they will not faint. For those who can run, they will not grow weary. And those who can soar.... I don't know which of these levels your 'hope-o-meter' is at today – but take heart: whatever your level is, God can increase your strength – to walk, to run, to soar. Our hope is not ultimately for something, but *in* Someone. And may that glorious Someone – the everlasting Lord – renew your strength today. Amen.

Day 5 – Isaiah 41:1-16 'The heavenly courtroom'

I'm sure many of you like a good courtroom drama. Whether it's series like Perry Mason, Kavanagh QC or Silk, or great films like To Kill a Mockingbird, Twelve Angry Men or Witness for the Prosecution, the sense of drama which surrounds a trial is often compelling. One of the earliest, and arguably the greatest, of all such dramas was the iconic 1946 film 'A Matter of Life and Death.' Squadron Leader Peter Carter (played by the dashing David Niven) dies as his Lancaster Bomber crashes, and, represented by his recently-departed friend Doctor Reeves, he and his lover June have to plead for an extension to his life in a heavenly courtroom. Eventually the jury decide.... well, I won't give that away, will I?!

It's a brilliant film, but what's missing in the heavenly courtroom is the divine Judge. The (human) jury is left to decide Carter's fate – it is God's home (heaven – although admittedly the film is careful not to insist that it is heaven) without its owner.

Isaiah 41 is set in another heavenly courtroom – only this time, the Lord Almighty is very much present. The chapter begins with the Lord summoning the nations and their idols to a parley (v1): 'Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the place of judgement.' Interestingly, the nations are invited to 'renew their strength' in this declaration – which could be an accidental repetition of the previous verse (and don't forget that the chapter breaks are not there in the original prophecy), but more likely a warning that the encounter will be formidable.

The underlying context of this chapter is a world which seems chaotic, where evil seems to prevail and where God's people feel they have been abandoned or forgotten by their God. Far from it, this chapter insists – indeed the whole of chapters 40-55 insist. The Lord is still in charge, and no power on earth or heaven can resist him. This chapter is full of reminders of the futility of other gods and the uselessness of idols, which have to be nailed in place so they don't fall over! (v7)

In contrast, the Lord Almighty still reigns – he acts in history (v2), he dwells with every generation of his people (v4), and he has not forgotten his loving choice (v9). He is still the Lord of his people, and is with them, will strengthen them and uphold them (v10).

In Jewish thought and culture, the right hand symbolised strength – and let's notice that the strength of God is not just used *for* his people (v10), it is also imparted *to* his people: the mighty right hand of the Lord God takes hold of *our* right hand (v13). We can be courageous and not fear (v14) because the Lord empowers us to prevail (v15). We are not, in the end, beaten or defeated by circumstances, but can overcome.

Give thanks today that in the heavenly courtroom, God has decided for you. He is on your side. And with his strength made perfect in your weakness, you can – and will – overcome. Hallelujah! Amen.

Day 6 – Isaiah 41:17-29 'Life in the desert'

The Atacama Desert is the driest place on earth. So dry, in fact, that space scientists use it most often to simulate the environment on Mars. Rain has fallen just 13 times in the last 40 years – so you might think that, with so little water, nothing could possibly survive. Except, remarkably, it does. In 2022, rain fell for the first time in five years – and the landscape was transformed into a lush meadow (<https://explorersweb.com/atacama-desert-bloom/>). Abundant life can flourish, even in a desert.

Today's passage contains a similar promise for God's people. The image of the desert has already been prominent in this amazing prophetic vision. It began with 'a voice of one calling in the desert' (or wilderness – 40:3). On that occasion, the image was of a highway through what is commonly regarded, then as now, as the most inhospitable type of landscape; in other words, there was a way out for lost humanity!

Today, we are still in the desert, but the perspective shifts – now we encounter a thirsty people, desperate for water (v17). Water is key to all life, and is used regularly in scripture as an image for life, especially abundant spiritual life. Where the river flows, as Ezekiel prophesies elsewhere, everything will live (Ezekiel 47:9).

And this is the great promise the Lord gives his people in this passage: (vv17-18) 'I, the Lord, will answer them... I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the deserts into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs.' The Lord will turn the spiritual equivalent of the Atacama into an abundant meadow in bloom (v19). Why? 'So that the people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this.' (v20)

There is life waiting to bloom, even in the desert – all it takes is the refreshing rain of God. Today, may the Lord send his refreshing again to us. May we all know that, however dry this season feels, abundant life can flourish anew. The life is *already there*, hidden in the parched soil – and the Lord alone can renew it. May that renewal be ours, this day and this season. Amen.

Day 7 – Isaiah 42:1-12 'Here is my servant'

In many ways, the opening verses of chapter 42 act as a summary of this whole amazing prophetic vision of chapters 40-55. It is the heart of the prophet's message, the 'new thing' (v9) soon to be proclaimed by the herald (ch40), and now revealed by the Lord in the heavenly courtroom (ch41). And what is this new thing? Not an idea or an invention, but a *person* – it's a new servant of the people: (v1) 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him.'

From this point, chapter 42 reads like a 'greatest hits' of God's promises, so you might be best today simply re-reading the passage and asking God to speak one of the many life-giving truths to your heart. I certainly can do no better today than to mark the highlights:

Firstly, let's note that God confers his blessing on this servant in three ways right at the start: the Lord upholds him, the Lord delights in him, and the Lord puts his Spirit on him. This servant doesn't appear by accident, or human choice – it is God who ordains him, who empowers him and – what a beautiful image this is – delights in him.

And this servant has a whole host of amazing attributes: he will bring justice (v1) – as we look back on the Old Testament's prophetic visions of the Messiah, viewed through the lens of Christ's coming, we rightly emphasise blessings like grace, love, joy and peace; but let's not overlook the fact that most of these visions – including this one – give at least as big a billing to justice. That was good news to a conquered people; but it remains just as comforting today to know that God will put things right. Those who deserve justice will get it eventually – in the kingdom of God, if not in our earthly kingdoms.

But it's a justice tempered with mercy. I love the verse which declares: (v3) 'A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.' This anointed servant will do things gently. And as an aside, the Hebrew word for 'reed' is very similar to the Hebrew version of the name Simon. When Simon Peter – Reedy Peter – denies Jesus, does Jesus bruise the reed? No, a bruised reed he will not break – not Simon's, not ours.

This servant also communicates – the islands (code language for the scattered people of God) will put their hope in his teaching (v4). He will be a light to the whole world (v6) and bringer of renewal – opening eyes and freeing captives (v7). He will represent the restoration and fulfilment of God's solemn commitment of love to his people – or, to use the language of the text, 'a covenant.'

And our response to this glorious new servant? A new song! 'Sing to the Lord a new song.' (v10) It is a calling for the whole world: by the sea, on the islands (v10), in the wilderness and the towns, on the mountaintops (v11). We are all to sing his praise from the ends of the earth (v10) and give glory to the Lord alone (v12). I'm not musical, but (thankfully) this this song is about more than just tuneful notes: it's a song of the heart, of our lives. This is my story, this is my song, praising my Saviour all the day long – may God grant us grace to have our eyes opened afresh today, singing a new song to this glorious Spirit-filled servant. Amen.

Day 8 – Isaiah 42:13-25 'Spiritual blindness'

I'm very thankful to have reasonably good eyesight. Losing any of our five senses is a profound loss; but for me personally, I think losing my sight would be the one sense I would find hardest to cope with: as someone who studied art as a younger man, I respond deeply to things at a visual level. I am full of admiration for those who cope with sight loss, and those who support them.

There is, though another kind of blindness: not literal blindness in this case, but what you might call selective or wilful blindness. An old saying, which was often aired in our family, was: 'None so blind as those who will not see.' It means a refusal to receive or accept something we don't like, or want to be confronted with. For example, we reject a piece of constructive criticism, or we are warned about something destructive and we bury our head in the sand – we refuse to see what's there in front of us. We are not literally blind, but wilfully blind.

Spiritual blindness often takes this form; and God's people in the Old Testament were past masters at it! We read so often of how they simply refused to obey God's good plan for them, despite the warnings. As our text for today says: (v24) 'they would not follow his ways, they did not obey his law.' No wonder, then, that the Lord declares, quite bluntly: (v19) 'Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of the Lord.'

At this point, let's acknowledge that the 'servant' image has morphed somewhat, from an individual to a people – and, although some scholars argue that the 'servant' of this chapter is God's people throughout, rather than one person, this is contradicted by v6, where the Spirit-filled servant will be 'a covenant for the people'. Prophecy is sometimes like this, and we need to remember that these are images and 'big-picture' visions, which can be little fuzzy around the edges. Like looking at a mountain range in the distance, we can't always pick out the individual peaks clearly.

The results of 'blindness' in the people were devastatingly clear: they forfeited the blessing of God, leading to violent conquest (v25), captivity and plunder of their wealth (v22). But, thankfully, it's not the whole story; for all that this is a tough passage, there is also the glorious, golden thread of grace. These same 'blind' people of God, so often wayward and disobedient, will also receive God's mercy afresh: (v16) 'I will lead the blind by ways they have not known... I will turn the darkness into light before them... I will not forsake them.'

Like the loving parent of rebellious teenagers, the Lord cannot abandon them. He promises to lead them once more – blind as they are. It's remarkable that the Lord does *not* say – 'change your ways *and then* I will lead you.' No, it's unconditional: our divine parent can't help but be merciful, to lavish his grace on the undeserving. Which is our reality, too! Blind as we are, the Lord loves us too much to abandon us. Yes, pray today for enlightenment where you need it, and for a heart that is obedient – but above, all, give thanks that this is our God. He does not forsake us! Amen.

Day 9 – Isaiah 43:1-7 'Because I love you'

Life can be overwhelming. This is true for pretty much everyone, at certain points. I had a trivial example today – I should have known that the day I wrote this particular reflection, my workload would be under real pressure, and I would feel the waters rising around my neck! What better moment, then, than to turn back to the promises in this amazing text.

Today's reading is one of many people's favourite portions of scripture. As with the first part of Isaiah 42, there are so many promises, but the one that people cling to perhaps most of all is verse 2: 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.'

For the original readers, this text was full of collective memory. The waters would have reminded every Israelite of the great story of the Exodus, and the crossing of the Red Sea. The fire would have reminded people of Moses, and the bush that didn't burn. Subsequent generations would also have thought of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace – although that story hadn't happened yet, at the time of writing.

But it's not just a memory, the Lord says – it is a present reality. What happened then is my promise to you *now*. I am still the Lord who brings you through these trials. And notice that it's not 'if' but when – *when* you pass... *when* you pass... *when* you walk. Trials are a part of life in this fallen world. What we need to know is not that, somehow, we can ensure they won't happen – but rather, that, in the midst of them, we have Someone to rely on. We are not alone. We will overcome.

And we can do that, ultimately, because this Someone loves us (v4). Our God does not uphold us grudgingly; it is the freely-given loving care of a divine parent, to whom we are precious (v4) and for whom we are created (v7). This is the foundation of the wonderful verse (2), that has sustained and blessed so many people. I'll leave the last word to the great David Wilkerson, in his commentary on this text:

'It is absolutely imperative that we believe -- quickly, firmly, today -- that God loves us and delights in us... Dear saint, don't look at your mounting bills. And don't try looking into an uncertain future. Your part is to trust in your loving Father's covenant promises, and to lean on his great love for you. You're going to come out victorious, because he's holding you in his loving arms.' Amen.

Day 10 – Isaiah 43:8-19 'Safe in God's hands'

In 1978, amateur archaeologist Ron Wyatt chartered a small plane for a flight over the Red Sea. Landing at Neweiba Beach – now a resort area in Egypt – he discovered a stone column lying in the water. Aware of the tradition that King Solomon had erected columns to commemorate the crossing of the Red Sea, he looked on the opposite side, and discovered an identical column inscribed with Hebrew text giving glory to the God of Israel who delivered His people through the Red Sea.

Excited by these extraordinary finds, he reasoned that if this was indeed the site of the crossing, there would be evidence of Egyptian chariots in the water; sure enough, one of the first things he found was a beautiful gold-plated chariot wheel, very fragile but clearly visible in the clear waters. Later, Wyatt and his sons found numerous other man-made artifacts and chariot wheels, including those with four, six and eight spokes, typical of the wheels used in the 18th Dynasty at the time of Moses – all intact, because coral had attached themselves to the wood, preserving them for 3,500 years! (For a recent exploration which shows the artefacts themselves, click here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIQ-QAKTqZc>)

Today's passage acts as something of a counterweight to yesterday. As we observed, the image of v2 would have connected with the collective memory of every Israelite: the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea in the story of the Exodus. But, of course, there was also another side to that story: what happened to the chasing armies of Pharaoh (and the above is conclusive proof that this was an historical event). The waters, which rescued God's people, judged their enemies, too.

And the Lord reminds them of this in vv16-17: 'he who made a way through the sea... drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again.' In what looked like a hopeless situation, the Lord came through for his people, in remarkable ways.

What happened then, the Lord says, will happen again. The Babylonians might look invincible now; but every empire falls, and the Lord will one day judge the Babylonians as he once did the Egyptians. Why? For the sake of his people: (v14) 'For your sake, I will... bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride.' As we'll see in a few days' time, this came to pass when Cyrus conquered them in 539BC.

The Lord is still in control. He alone is ruler of the universe (v10); he only saves (v11). We are safe in this mighty God's hands (v13) – no power of hell, no scheme or plan, can ever pluck us from his hand. What great news for God's people then. And what comfort, what encouragement, for us now!

Day 11 – Isaiah 43:20-44:5 'Wearied and burdened?'

It's been a long week – I'm sure some of you resonate with that! Tiredness seems to be part of the modern condition. We have created hectic lives and lifestyles, but the truth is that it's been centuries in the making. Improvements to travel, which (the law of unintended consequences) tended to force families and communities apart. The invention of electric lighting, which led to us going to bed later and getting less sleep. Developments in food technology, which have generated much greater variety in our diet, but also far more processed, poor-quality food. Add into the mix the technological advances which have speeded up the pace of life....

'Yet... you have not wearied yourselves for *me*, Israel.' (v22) These words hit with a hammer blow at our protestations of weariness. It is, at some level, a selective tiredness. What is wearing us out is not our spiritual zeal! This is the charge the Lord lays at his people today. Even the animals, he says, give him more honour, more gratitude for his provision of sustenance (v20).

Instead, 'you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offences.' (v24) The two are, of course, connected: a lack of investment in spiritual life inevitably impedes the growth of obedience, the power to see a lifestyle transformed and renewed by the grace of God. The evidence, God says, is overwhelming: 'Review the past for me,' he challenges in v26, and the results are obvious, from the first generation of God's people (v27). It is a history of disobedience and spiritual apathy.

But it's not the end of the story. What we see in this passage is an extraordinary promise of what you might call 'divine amnesia'. This gracious God, our Lord, will choose to 'remember your sins no more.' (v25) He does it for his own sake (v24); this is not ego, but because *it is who he is*. 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin,' is how he introduced himself to his people at Mount Sinai more than 600 years previously (Exodus 34:6-7). He blots out our transgressions because he cannot be true to himself otherwise.

Indeed, in a wonderful parallel with the animals who give him thanks at the start of our passage, the Lord will 'pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground' (44:3) – inviting them (and us) to put right the failings of the past. However, it's not, ultimately, about *our* effort but God's gracious, unconditional gift. He made us (v2), he chose us (v1, v2) and he pours out the water, even as he pours out the Spirit (v3) to empower us to lead the renewed lives he desires for us.

It is because of God's immense patience, mercy and compassion that we can each say: 'I belong to the Lord.' (v5) May the Lord pour out his Spirit on us again, that we might receive this grace, and may it overflow in our lives today, for his glory. Amen.

Day 12 – Isaiah 44:6-23 'Worthless substitutes'

We've been enjoying a TV series this month about art theft. Each episode is the story of a real-life art heist, and the efforts required to recover the stolen paintings. The first instalment detailed the loss of two Turner paintings, valued (even in 1994) at £24m for the pair. After a tale of high drama and intrigue, eventually both were recovered, and returned to their permanent home in Tate Britain – they are now insured for £120m!

I love the work of JMW Turner; I have often been to see his work in London – and his iconic 'Rain, Steam and Speed' was a poster on my bedroom wall for some years. But, for all the joy it gives me, it is worth remembering that the value of these paintings bears no relation to the materials which made it. You can buy the canvas, oils and a nice frame for about £200 – much less, if you skimp on quality. They might generate our love and admiration, but they will never deserve our worship.

And it is this distinction which sets the backdrop for today's passage. We have already encountered the Lord's challenge to false gods twice in this series: to the comic image of the toppling little idol in ch40, and the summons to the heavenly courtroom in ch41. Today, the Lord returns in detail to the image of chapter 40 – and the point He makes is simply this: why do you worship something whose effective, material value is worthless?

Consider the creative process, God says: the carpenter 'cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. It is used as fuel for burning... he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it.' (vv14-15) Think rationally, the Lord says – can't you see how ridiculous this is? That you would say to this lump of wood (which might have been burned for fuel or cooking): 'Save me! You are my god!' (v17)

Biblically, idols are good things which wrongly take a place in our hearts that they don't deserve. Money, food, beautiful things – we need them, and rightly used, they can do great good. They are great servants, but lousy masters. Worst of all, they deceive us: 'Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him.' (v20)

We may not have little lumps of wood that we worship; but the attraction of other idols, other dangers, is just as prevalent today. We are no different; it is the human condition. Different idols, same temptations. But there is good news. The power of truth unmasks the deceptions of idols – and even better, our God is the God of second chances... and third... and fourth... 'I have swept away your offences like a cloud... Return to me, for I have redeemed you.' (v22)

Today, can I encourage to finish as the passage does: with gratitude for the Lord's mercy, and his glory. And let's all pray for grace to keep the Lord, and the Lord alone, uppermost in our hearts. For He alone is worthy of our praise. Amen.

Day 13 – Isaiah 44:24-45:25 'There is no other'

The bible is full of unlikely heroes. Think of Abraham, called from what became Babylon to receive the promises of the Lord and become the father of God's people. Think of Moses, in exile for murder, called to redeem God's people, himself an example of redemption. Think of Rahab, serving God's people at great risk to herself; or Ruth, choosing sacrificial family loyalty and joining the greatest family tree of all.

Today's passage celebrates another unlikely hero, and it is particularly appropriate that we focus on him in this season of Epiphany, when we remember the Magi, who got to play a vital part in the coming of Christ. It's easy to miss the scandal in the nativity story: of all the people God could have chosen to attend the birth of the Messiah, he chose rough and ready shepherds and gentile astrologers. The Magi were not meant to play any part in the story of God's people. Whenever we meet them elsewhere in scripture, they usually represent the false religious leaders of the pagan enemies of God – think of the magicians in Pharaoh's or Nebuchadnezzar's courts.

But God chose to use *them* – because, despite their misdirected (even forbidden) practices, the hearts of the Magi were open to the Lord. They were seeking – and those who seek, as someone once said (you know who), shall find.

But the Magi are not the first people in scripture to be used by God, despite not being part of God's people. Rahab (mentioned above) would be a great example, as would the central figure in our passage today. Enter King Cyrus. Cyrus is one of the great leaders of world history. Powerful enough to overthrow the world's premier empire at the time (Babylon), yet humane and gracious enough to grant an unusual amount of religious freedom in his lands – including, as the Jewish exiles would find to their great joy, towards God's people.

Our passage begins with the Lord promising that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and inhabited (44:26) – to which the obvious question from any reader of the time would be: 'How?' This could never happen while Babylon ruled the roost. The Lord, however, has a plan: Cyrus 'is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please.' (44:28) Indeed, Cyrus will be anointed (45:1) – a truly astonishing claim for the original Jewish readers, since anointing was a sign of the Lord's blessing and empowerment, only given to the leaders of God's people. But here, a non-Jew, indeed a pagan king, Cyrus receives it!

Why? To remind Israel of one fundamental truth: there is only one Lord, and this Lord has all the authority in the universe. He does as he wills – and if he wants to use a pagan ruler to accomplish his purposes, he will. The phrase that repeats again and again in this passage is: 'There is no other' – six times like that, a further four times in variant versions of the same phrase. A perfect ten!

Today, let's take heart from this simple message, as true today as it was 2,500 years ago. Where can we find all we need to overcome the challenges of our life? In the Lord, and the Lord alone. 'In the Lord alone are deliverance and strength.' (45:24) As you pray, carry that word with you, and may it empower all you are, and all you do, this day and this week. Amen.

Day 14 – Isaiah 46:1-13 'I will sustain you'

Last week we watched a brilliant wildlife documentary 'Wild Scandinavia'. As is often the case nowadays, this programme also included human interaction with nature – including a sequence featuring wild ice skaters. These hardy souls don't use rinks like the rest of us; they wait for the lakes and fjords to freeze, and then head out into (or rather, onto) the 'frozen deep'.

Apparently, the minimum thickness for the ice is 3.2cm – which seems very thin to me! 4cm is pretty safe, and 10cm is positively dull: 'it can take the weight of a car,' joked one of the skaters. So, the first thing the skaters do each winter season is head out, (carefully) testing the thickness of the ice with metal rods.

Having ascertained that the ice was thick enough (mostly), the camera operator then went out onto the ice with the skaters, with the most extraordinary shots. Against a clear blue sky, it looks like they are literally skating on nothing – gliding effortlessly, almost magically, on top of the water. Despite all appearances to the contrary, the ice sheet sustains them.

It's a brilliant illustration of our passage for today. Yesterday, the Lord revealed his plan to use King Cyrus as his anointed agent of redemption, in the sense of defeating Babylon and restoring God's people to their land. He reminded them again and again that he is the only God, and therefore the only one worthy of trust, the one who has the authority to do this.

Today's passage continues in the same vein: (v9) 'I am God, and there is no other... My purpose will stand, and I will do as I please.' It's natural that God needs to repeat himself: we humans are slow learners – these lessons have taken Israel more than 500 years already, and it would be no different if it was us! Trusting the Lord is relentlessly tested by the challenges of life. It may feel, like the wild skaters, as if we are being asked to skate on thin air. Is God really enough to hold us? Will we not just sink?

In answer, God reminds them of how often he has come through for them in the past (v9) – what is happening now is only because he wills it, it is not somehow that he can't help them. Nothing has changed – he is still their Lord, and he gives them this wonderful promise: (v4) 'Even to your old age... I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you.' The word 'sustain' literally means to hold up from underneath – and just like the ice sheet, whatever doubting voices whisper in our ear, the Lord is always enough. He will bear us up, he will sustain us, just as he has sustained us in the past, and will do again in the future.

What a word for us today: 'I will sustain you.' May the Lord grant us grace, not just to hear it, but to believe and receive it. Old or young, may it be written on our hearts – our God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.

Day 15 – Isaiah 47:1-15 'As you sow...'

After the first Gulf War in the early 1990s, Saddam Hussein ordered a new palace to be built, in the style of a Sumerian ziggurat, and called (perhaps not too surprisingly) 'Saddam Hill'. Of all his many palaces and residences, this was the most controversial, for one main reason: he built it on top of some of the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon, looking out on the rest. Although this naturally outraged archaeologists, the political significance of such an act is obvious. For 300 years – including the era of today's passage – Babylon was the greatest city in the world. Even now, its ruins extend to some four square miles, a vast expanse for an ancient city. London did not reach a similar population size (c.200,000) until 1600AD! The Hanging Gardens planted by Nebuchadnezzar were legendary, but they formed only a small part of an awe-inducing capital.

No wonder that Babylon carried an innate sense of its own superiority, a sense conveyed very clearly in today's passage: (v7) 'You said, "I am for ever – the eternal queen!"' The most powerful empire at the time, centred in the biggest city, whose armies conquered all before them. It's easy to believe your own hype, isn't it?

And this hubris, the Lord warns them today, will be their downfall. The only reason the Lord allowed their dominance was because of his people's disobedience (v6). Throughout their history, the Lord had warned his people that only their unfaithfulness would make them vulnerable to their enemies. As long as they stayed true to him, he would always be true to them.

However, in granting a season of success to Babylon, the Lord expected better of them, too: (v6) 'I gave them into your hand, and you showed them no mercy.' The clear implication here is that Babylon had the chance to demonstrate that they were worthy of the power they wielded, and they had failed the test. Not only had they not shown mercy when they had the opportunity, but their reliance on occult practices remained detestable: (v10,v12) 'You have trusted in your wickedness... Keep on then, with your magic spells and your many sorceries... Perhaps you will succeed...'

Many years later, St Paul gave a simple, but profound piece of advice to the early church, resting on the teaching of Jesus himself: 'As you sow, so shall you reap.' Babylon built a glorious house on sand, and it was about to be washed away. This is both an encouragement and a challenge for us. Positively, it reminds us that no human power – especially those set up in defiance of the Lord – will ever succeed for long. Empires fall; what goes around, comes around. The Lord is still in control.

It is a challenge, too: a reminder to make sure we are building on the Rock. This is the only sure foundation, then as now. But, even here, there is grace: 600 years later, Babylonian magicians followed the star to find the Messiah. A new way of redemption was coming – one to which all people are invited, and a way which remains our Rock and our salvation, too. Praise be to God!

Day 16 – Isaiah 48:1-11 'Brass necked?'

Pride is arguably the most basic of all human failings. It's there right at the start of scripture: it was partly the serpent's appeal to our pride ('you can be like God!') that led Adam and Eve astray. Cain killed Abel because he couldn't bear that Abel's offering was better regarded than his own. Lamech visited sevenfold revenge on anyone who crossed him, because of the vanity of wounded pride.

Pride elevates ourselves, and lowers others. Whilst we might chuckle at Nebuchadnezzar building a 90-foot statue of himself at the height of his powers (a story contemporaneous with the context of this prophetic vision), if we're honest we're quite good at creating metaphorical statues to ourselves in our relationships with others. It is the human condition.

Sadly, we can still be prone to it, even within a faith community. Indeed, we are always tempted to believe our own hype. Years of obedience and blessing can subtly chip away at our humility; we can start to believe that our blessings are really due to us – to our spiritual maturity, our obedience. Or, even if we admit that God still takes the credit, the fact that he has chosen *us* (and, we start to think, not others) can be a perverse form of pride. He must have chosen us for a reason!

God's people were just as prone to this way of thinking as anyone else – over the centuries, their status as primary recipients of the Lord's blessing had become a source of pride. Unfortunately, it was a sense of entitlement they didn't remotely deserve, as the Lord tells them bluntly in today's passage: (vv1-2) 'you who take oaths in the name of the Lord... but not in truth or righteousness... and claim to rely on the God of Israel.'

The reality is very different: (v4) 'For I knew how stubborn you were; your neck muscles were iron, your forehead was bronze.' Nowadays we use a different metal to describe a state of pride: brass neck! But it's the same idea, and the Lord adds hard-headedness/a refusal to listen to wisdom (the forehead of bronze) to the mix. The Lord pointedly reminds them that everything that has come to pass they were warned about (v5), although even now he's not sure they will admit their folly (v6).

But there is good news, in the midst of this challenge. Israel might not have changed – 'you were called a rebel from birth' (v8) – but thankfully the Lord hasn't, either. He is still the God of second chances, of grace. He is also conscious that the failings of his people discredit his own name. The Lord is the author of life; how tragic if others turn away from the true Source of Life because his own people let him down... So, a new hope is coming. And as we reflect on these tough words today, may the Lord cause humility to rise in our hearts, and gratitude that he 'delays his wrath'. We follow a crucified Messiah, and this is our hope, our salvation and our pattern. Amen.

Day 17 – Isaiah 48:12-22 'What is best for you'

Did God really say....? At the risk of repeating myself, we're going to begin today where we began yesterday, with Adam and Eve speaking with the serpent. The snake's first words are some of the most spiritually insightful in all of scripture. The Lord made a good world, one which is joyously described in the opening two chapters of the bible. Human beings were brought into the heart of this good world ('very good', the Lord declared) and given complete freedom to enjoy this world. There was only one boundary, only one tree which was forbidden.

Did God really say...? (Genesis 3:1) An innocent question, apparently, but one which created a spark of doubt. In other words, isn't God a spoilsport for setting you any boundaries at all? Surely, o humans, God doesn't have your best interests at heart? After all, isn't he keeping the good stuff for himself? Is his way really the best way for you to live?

Trust as to whether God's way really is the best for us is probably the greatest spiritual test we'll ever face. God is great – but is he *good*? That was the serpent's lie at the start of human history – but it never wears out; even in the 21st century, it remains the lie we are most susceptible to. Many a life of faith has foundered on the rock of doubting God's goodness. When bad things happen, do we still trust? When the wicked prosper and the faithful are tested, do we still trust?

'If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your wellbeing like the waves of the sea.' (v18) In today's passage, the Lord cries out in sadness at what has happened to his people. All along, they only to live faithfully according to his commands...

But the root issue is not disobedience – the previous verse (v17) lays bare the real cause of where God's people had gone wrong: 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.' Somewhere along the way, God's people had stopped believing this. It was the serpent's lie writ large again, and it teaches us one of the great spiritual lessons of life. Whatever life throws at us, it is vital to trust that the Lord's way really is best for us, and for all humanity. Disobedience comes much more easily when we stop believing that God's way is good for us. After all, why bother with the challenging bits, if they don't do us any good anyway?

Thankfully the passage also contains the antidotes to these nagging voices: look at our calling (v12). Never forget that the Lord has reached out to you, personally. Look at creation (v13) – does it not testify continually to the greatness and goodness of God? Look at our story of faith, of the ways God has acted (v21) – we all have a testimony of God's intervention in our lives. At times of challenge, we can go back to these and say: yes, God was there; yes, he loves us; yes, his way is best.

As you reflect and pray today, take a moment to weigh these things. Reaffirm that God is great – but he is also good. He is for you. And his love, grace and abiding presence is still sufficient for you. Amen.

Day 18 – Isaiah 49:1-7 'To the ends of the earth'

Recently I heard the story of the Norwegian village that didn't receive a single scrap of sunlight for 6 whole months. Their solution was to install three mirrors which move and rotate on a specific axis, to capture the sunlight. Its tracking system enables them to track the sun, and reflect sunlight downwards to the main square.

It's a wonderful reminder of the power of light – and also that there are some parts of the world which miss out on light for long periods of the year. That said, at whatever point you're reading this today, it remains true that much of our world will be bathed in light. The way that our earth rotates means that sunlight extends to the ends of the earth.

In today's reading, we see a similar promise of global spiritual light. Isaiah 40-55 contains a number of 'Servant Songs', of which this is the second (the others are in chapters 42, 50 and 52-53). And in this particular song, God promises *a new light for the whole world*. The blessings enjoyed by Israel would soon be available to all (v6): which had always been the plan, but had not quite come to fruition before now. As people gazed on the ruins of Jerusalem, and wondered if life would ever recover, a new hope was springing up: one that was too big to be held within one people, but would stretch across the globe. This light would bring God's salvation 'to the ends of the earth.'

It's easy to take this glorious truth for granted. We're so used to the idea of universal access to God, we forget how rare it is. Virtually all other worldviews place some sort of limit on who's 'in', but not the God of the bible. The grace of the one true God is available for all.

As humans we are made in the image of God, who is light. It follows that *we were made to live in light* – not just the light of the sun, but the light of the Son, too. When we pray, there will be thousands of people, maybe millions too, praying at that exact moment. Likewise when we sing. A global chorus of unceasing prayer and praise, as day follows night, and night follows day. It echoes the unending glory of heaven, where God is eternally praised.

So today, and every day, our small voice joins with millions of others across the world and throughout eternity, all worshipping the true light, the true servant who sets us free. May that thought lift our hearts... and may it also cause us to offer prayers of thanks and support for all who will pray and praise in Jesus' name across the world today.

Day 19 – Isaiah 49:8-13 'Come out, be free!'

A man learns that his friend has unexpectedly died. He travels to the village where his friend lived to comfort his sisters, where he weeps with them, and then to grave where his friend is buried. A crowd gathers round, as he calls out to the tomb: 'Lazarus, come out!'

A little while previously, the same man meets a woman on the road. Again, a crowd has gathered and initially he can't see who she is properly. But he stops, and asks the trembling woman to speak with him: 'Daughter your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.'

Come out. Be free.

These are not isolated examples. When this man's friend and herald has a momentary wobble as to whether he really is God's promised Saviour, the man sends him this encouragement: 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

We love the rich imagery of Isaiah – like gazing out from a mountaintop, the prophetic imagination is glorious, and lifts the spirit. But it's not just pictures and metaphors – this stuff really happens. *It is fulfilled*: in one particular person, at a specific point in history, the true Servant of which these servant songs speak. A man who comes, both to gather the tribes of Israel and to offer salvation to the ends of the earth. The author of a new – or perhaps better put, a *renewed* – covenant (v8). One who will guide and lead his people beside springs of (living) water (v10), and have compassion on the afflicted (v13).

This Servant comes to bring hope: (v9) 'to say to the captives, "Come out," and to those in darkness, "Be free!"' This Servant is Jesus. The fulfilment of these promises, the prophetic Word made flesh, the one who offers real hope to real people with real problems and crises – then, and now. This Jesus still says to his afflicted ones: Come out! Be free!

Today, if you know someone who needs the freedom and restoration of Christ – pray for them. It may even be you. Claim the truth of these promises, because they never perish, fade or wear out. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Hallelujah! Amen.

Day 20 – Isaiah 49:14-26 'Engraved on His palms'

I've just finished the novel 'The Tattooist of Auschwitz'. It's the harrowing but compelling – and ultimately hopeful – true story of Slovakian Jew Lale Sokolov who is sent to the infamous concentration camp, and survives by taking a job as the camp tattooist. His role is to engrave a number on the forearm of every arrival. It's hard to imagine the horror of this place, even now, and the act of tattooing is, in its way, a poignant symbol of a dehumanising ideology which reduces precious humans, made in God's image, to a mere number.

Contrast this with the beautiful phrase which adorns v16 of today's passage; if the tattooist's work in the novel was designed as a mark of hate, here is God's ultimate mark of love, his cry to his beloved people: 'See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.'

As we have observed throughout, Isaiah 40-55 is God's great love letter to his people. Though they are rebellious to the core (48:8), he cannot abandon them, he loves them too much – He will bring redemption and restoration to them. Studded through the text are these wonderful images which remind them of his care: he carries them close to his heart (40:11), he upholds them in the flood and the fire (43:2) – and, here, he engraves them on the palms of his hands. A permanent mark of love, a sign that he has not forgotten them, and never will.

This passage was a favourite of Charles Spurgeon's, one he preached on many times. And the reason is because, 600 years later, this image became reality. The Son of God, the Word made flesh, had his palms marked for the sake of love – in way that perhaps could never have been foreseen from this prophetic image, but is abundantly clear in hindsight. As Spurgeon comments: 'What are these wounds in Your hands? . . . The engraver's tool was the nail, backed by the hammer. He must be fastened to the Cross, that His people might be truly engraved on the palms of His hands.'

A week later, Jesus' friend Thomas is invited to believe in the most powerful way: "Put your finger here; see my hands.... Stop doubting and believe. Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

I mentioned that Lale's story has a hopeful ending. While marking prisoners one day he meets a girl, is captivated by her eyes, and they fall in love. Both determine to survive, and to be together after the horror. To Lale, this girl is not a number, but the most precious thing in his life, the object of his love and devotion. That is our reality, too: we are engraved on the palms of our loving Lord. We are infinitely valuable to Him. May that truth guard our hearts today, and inspire us to live as beloved children of our Heavenly Father. Amen.

Dat 21 – Isaiah 50:1-11 'The true servant'

On Sunday week, the Kansas City Chiefs will play the San Francisco 49ers in Superbowl 58. The quarterback (star player) for the 49ers is Brock Purdy, who is finishing only his second year as a professional and will be playing in his first Superbowl. His story is a remarkable one. His nickname is 'Mr Irrelevant'; each year NFL teams pick the best players from college – a total of 262 players were drafted early in 2022, including 8 other quarterbacks. 261 players were picked ahead of him. The 262nd and final pick of the draft was Brock Purdy. The last player to be picked gains the unenviable nickname each season of 'Mr Irrelevant'. Someone who makes up the numbers, who is never expected to actually star in the team.

Even after being drafted, he was the third choice for his position in the team. But in the first two months of the new season, first the starting quarterback, and then the back-up, got injured. The 49ers had no choice but to throw Mr Irrelevant into the fray. And he delivered... in fact, he delivered so well that the 49ers won all their remaining games that season, only losing at the final hurdle before the Superbowl. This year they've gone one better; Brock Purdy may have been overlooked by eight other teams, who all chose someone else – but, it turns out, he was the jewel in the crown.

Isaiah 50 feels a bit like Brock Purdy. It is probably the greatest Old Testament chapter that nobody's ever heard of. Be honest – how many times have you ever heard Isaiah 50 quoted anywhere, by anyone? Even among these chapters of Isaiah, we regularly read sections of chapters 40, 42, 43, 49, 52-53 and 55 in church. But chapter 50? Overlooked.

And yet – read verses 4-9 again and see how closely it matches the life, ministry and death of Jesus Christ. The word that sustains the weary (v4), the listening ear to God's wisdom morning by morning (v4: remember Jesus' early morning excursions to pray), turning the other cheek to those who oppose him (v6) – and that's just his ministry. Now think about the last few days of his life: the false charges (v8), the mocking (v7), the unjust disgrace (v7, v9). *It's all here.*

But it doesn't end there, does it? We also see the determination to be obedient (v7: 'face like flint'), the vindication from the Lord (v8, v9). The true servant faces down his opponents and triumphs. *It's all here* – written down 600 years before it happened. Wow!

The beginning and end of this chapter focus on us. And it's a 'before and after' scenario. Before, the Lord laments that he keeps knocking, but nobody is home (v2) – a powerful image of our refusal to listen and obey God. But, after the ministry of the servant, this wonderful invitation is offered to all: (v10) 'Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God.'

600 years later, a controversial rabbi stood up and declared to God's people: 'I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' This is the light of the true Servant. The jewel in our crown – the bringer of light. As we give thanks for these extraordinary visions of the prophet, may the Lord grant us grace to walk in the light of this Servant today. And if he comes knocking – let's be home! Amen.

Day 22 – Isaiah 51:1-8 'Look to the rock'

Some of our relatives live on the Isle of Portland. Nowadays, Portland is most well-known for its iconic lighthouse (Portland Bill) and also for hosting the sailing events at the 2012 Olympics (the National Sailing Academy is based there). In days gone by, however, its primary source of fame was its stone. Portland Stone has been quarried there since Roman times, and there is still a functioning quarry on the island now – albeit the modern site is completely underground.

At its height, Portland's quarries employed hundreds of people, but today the old opencast quarries have been turned into a sculpture park and nature reserve, which we visited a few years ago. It's a really lovely place to explore, with a gaunt beauty and a wonderful history. As someone who disembarked at Waterloo Station on my way to work for seven years, it was also amazing to see the actual place which quarried the famous stones now cladding Waterloo Bridge, over which I walked many times; or, indeed, which built St Paul's Cathedral, which I could see from my office window. I could finally make the connection between these great stone structures and the quarry from which the stones had been hewn.

Today's passage picks up this image and applies it to God's people. As we've seen, the background to this whole prophetic vision is the fall of Jerusalem and the conquest of their land – these shattering events had provoked deep soul-searching among the Israelites. A new hunger for spiritual renewal was growing. The people finally understood the warnings they had ignored for so many years: they had been judged for their disobedience to the Lord, and were now trying to seek him again.

And the Lord's advice? (v1) 'Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were cut, and to the quarry from which you were hewn.' In other words, go back to your roots, to the original covenant God had made with them: 'I will be your God, and you will be my people.' They can't build on anything else – having tried to, their 'house' was in ruins (v3).

In October 1940, St Paul's Cathedral was damaged during the blitz, and the arch over the high altar required a new keystone. What material would they use? It had to be Portland stone, of course – indeed, the commissioning letter for the repair in 1942 describes it delightfully thus: 'It carries some fifty cubic feet of finest Portland stone, and will most surely look down at the faithful for many centuries to come.'

Look to the rock from which you were cut. It's great wisdom for us now. We can't build our spiritual lives – or repair them – in any other way. The Lord always calls us back to basics: to him, to the simple joy of being his people, while he lavishes his love upon us as our Lord. 'My righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations.' (v8) May these beautiful truths lift our hearts today, and keep our feet placed firmly on the Rock. Amen.

Day 23 – Isaiah 51:9-16 'Wakey, wakey!'

I wonder whether you find it easy to rouse yourself from sleep in the morning? I remember going as a child to a summer camp, where one of the leaders walked around every morning at 7am playing a trumpet at full blast. I can say with confidence that this definitely worked – which is just as well, as I've never been very good in the morning. My alarm clock has always needed a snooze function, and in my 20s it was not unknown to require pressing every four minutes for more than half an hour before I could finally stumble out of bed.

The phrase itself 'Wakey, wakey, rise and shine' is often associated with Butlins holidays and the famous Redcoats inaugurating another day of organised jollity ahead... but it's been used by the British Army for much longer than that, and the 'rise and shine' is thought to refer to the boot polishing required of squaddies before morning parade.

However, the phrase is arguably much, much older still. Today's passage is really the biblical equivalent, at least 2,500 years old. 'Awake, awake!' begins verse 8, introducing a section of the text (through to 52:12) where the command occurs no less than three times. It is a call to action, a response to all the great promises of God contained in Isaiah's prophetic vision. Tomorrow, we'll see the Lord calling his people to rouse themselves – but today, the Lord applies it first and foremost to himself (or maybe the prophet calls on God, in faith and hope): 'Awake, awake, arm of the Lord, clothe yourself with strength!' Remember the great victory in Egypt (and here, Rahab is a nickname for that country), when God's people were rescued through the Red Sea, which then swallowed the pursuing army (vv9-10).

If the Lord could do that *then*, the prophet declares, surely he can do it again. In another repetition – this time of an earlier prophecy in 35:10 – the Lord promises that 'those [he] has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads... sorrow and sighing will flee away.' (v11)

What the Lord calls his people to in this first 'awake' section is *courage*: (vv12-13) 'Who are you that fear mere mortals... that you forget the Lord your Maker, who stretches out the heavens?' It's a challenging reminder that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. The source of this courage is the greatness of the Lord. However big our problems look – or the people who intimidate us – our God is greater. If he can create the universe, then he is enough for our challenges.

So, today, offer your challenges to the Lord, in faith and hope. And may he grant you grace to believe his word, and courage to live in his strength. The arm of the Lord is awake, and he covers us with the shadow of his hand (v16). Amen.

Day 24 – Isaiah 51:17-52:6 'Shake off your dust'

In North America, the bobwhite quail is fond of dustbathing. It's a comfort behaviour for this bird, linked to the oiling of the quail's feathers. The quail pecks at the dust, then squats in it, dispersing the dust over the body with its wings and feet, and then, finally, it shakes off the dust.

In today's passage, we see God urging his people to 'shake off your dust' (v2) – only this time, the reason is not for comfort, but (as we saw yesterday) for courage. The image began at the end of the previous chapter; as God's people were judged and conquered, their submission is powerfully depicted as follows: (v20) 'Your children have fainted, they lie at every street corner.' God's people – in particular the children, who represent their future – are literally out for the count, lying inert in the dust of a destroyed city.

But they are not destined to lie there forever. Now, a new voice calls them back to life: (vv1-2) 'Awake, awake, Zion, clothe yourself with strength!... Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned Jerusalem.'

It is an image of freedom – but this freedom comes at an (unspecified) cost: (v3) 'For this is what the Lord says: "You were sold for nothing, and without money you will be redeemed."' We learn of the true cost of this redemption in the next chapter – but today, the promise is one of hope, designed to stir the hearts of God's people again. Redemption is coming, freedom is coming, the chains that bound God's people will be loosed. They may have been oppressed by much bigger nations (v4) – but it won't last forever.

There are times in our lives when what you might call the dust of life settles on us. It may be a big thing we have always wrestled with, or a hundred little things – but somehow it seems to attach itself to us. We try to look upwards to our heavenly transformation, and yet feel covered by 'the dust of the earth,' our frailty and mortality. We are pulled, if you like, in two directions: 'gravity's pulling me, but heaven is calling me,' as Delirious sang many years ago.

This passage reminds us that the call of heaven is always greater than the pull of gravity. We *can* shake off the dust, and live in the freedom of the redeemed children of God. Today, take a few moments to name your particular 'dust'... but then seize faith, in Christ's name, to shake it off. What God promised his people in the time of Isaiah is no less true for us today – even more so, with the hope of Christ, and the power of the Spirit, in our hearts. Awake, awake! The Lord is still calling us into life. Amen.

Day 25 – Isaiah 52:7-12 'Beautiful feet'

It seems hard to credit it, in these days of instant messages and global news, but for much of history, news relied on messengers, carrying messages in person to those waiting for news. I've just finished John Buchan's marvellous novel 'Midwinter', which is a fictionalised account of Bonnie Prince Charlie's failed attempt to seize the English throne in 1745. The central character is Alistair Maclean, a Stuart loyalist who is secretly sent ahead into England to gain news of how many of the English were prepared to support the Prince's cause – especially those willing to raise arms and fight for him.

The mission rests on Maclean being able to get from Oxfordshire to Derby in time to tell Prince Charles that there were indeed thousands of men in the West ready to march on London at his word – at which point Charles would likely overcome the royal forces and succeed. For the Stuart claimant, Maclean is the messenger with the greatest good news – but will he make it in time?

I won't spoil the ending, but it's a great example of how news travelled for much of history. Today, what happens thousands of miles away is news within minutes – not so for most of our thousands of years of human civilisation. News needs someone to tell it, a messenger to spread it.

Over this whole series, the Lord has spelled out the promise of a new hope for his people. Then, over the last two days, and in view of this promise, the Lord has called his people to wake from their spiritual slumber and be ready. Today, everything coalesces, if you like, into a specific moment, when this news is finally shared with the people. The heralds are heading over the mountains (the east of Israel is mountainous, so those returning to their homeland would have to cross them to reach the heartland of Israel) to proclaim to those left in Israel (vv7-8) – even the very ruins of Jerusalem themselves (v9) – the good news of redemption that God has promised: 'Your God reigns!'

How beautiful are those feet! Imagine the joy welling up after years of sadness and despair. Imagine the excited shouts of the watchmen who first see the messengers arriving. Imagine the comfort to the soul for those eking out a life among the ruined villages and towns. It's a wonderful image; and it's one that St Paul picks up in the New Testament, when he encourages the Christians in Ephesus to have feet 'fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.' (Ephesians 6:15) A direct quote from Isaiah 52, applied to Christian mission now.

Gospel shoes. Most of us follow Jesus because someone first told us about him. We might live in a globalised virtual world (and there are benefits, as we read this reflection online today!) – but let's never forget the power of sharing the good news with someone, in person, face-to-face, heart to heart. May God grant us all gospel shoes, wherever we have the opportunity. How beautiful are those feet! Amen.

Day 26 – Isaiah 52:13-53:3 'Man of sorrows'

There are moments, in human endeavour, of pure inspiration: times when it seems that God takes over and what comes forth is beyond what we could have dreamed of. George Frideric Handel had such a moment when the tune for what became the Hallelujah Chorus came to him: 'I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels,' he later commented. Maybe some of you have also had that experience listening to his sublime masterpiece.

In biblical terms, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is just such a passage – a text so important, so extraordinary that it feels like holy ground just reading it. Of all the prophetic visions of the Messiah in the Old Testament, this is the most powerful, the most compelling, the closest we have to the gospel accounts of Holy Week; yet written ('seen') hundreds of years in advance. We're looking at this text today and tomorrow, though we could never exhaust its depths – today, we simply observe the remarkable description of the Messiah.

This description in many ways runs completely counter to the traditional vision of the anointed rescuer of God's people: a conquering hero, a charismatic leader. It does not contradict the previous visions of God's 'righteous servant' outlined in earlier chapters (42, 49, 50) – but it does substantially alter our perception of the person who inhabits those other visions. Without Isaiah 52:13-53:12, we might legitimately imagine the servant to be such a conquering hero, and it's fascinating that even in Jesus' day, such a vision was really the only vision God's people had of their promised Messiah.

And yet, and yet... here in this last of the four great 'servant songs', a different note is struck. Yes, the Messiah will *also* be all those things we marvelled in the previous servant songs: a bringer of justice to the nations (42:1), a great teacher (42:4), a liberator of captives (42:7, 49:9), a light for the world (49:6). But, as the song of chapter 50 hinted, so this passage makes clear – this servant will also be rejected, despised, condemned.

Indeed, the Messiah will be a 'man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering' (53:3); so much suffering, in fact, that 'his appearance was disfigured beyond that of any human being, and his form beyond human likeness.' (52:14). Here is the crucified Messiah envisioned before us.

Most of the filmed accounts of Jesus tend to picture him as good-looking, with long hair flowing in the wind. Isaiah 52-53 gives us the real view – at least, the view at the moment of his great act of self-sacrifice. And, despite the rejection, this is precisely when he is 'raised and lifted up and highly exalted' (52:13), a moment which sprinkles (significant word) many nations, and causes even monarchs to fall silent (52:15).

Here is the gospel of salvation, promised centuries before. We stand on holy ground. May the Lord grant us all again a sense of deep awe, and gratitude: 'Man of sorrows, what a name! – for the Son of God who came, ruined sinners to reclaim: hallelujah, what a Saviour!' Amen.

Day 27 – Isaiah 53:4-12 'Pierced for our transgressions'

One of the things that people have often observed is how little Jesus explained the theology of his own death. Yes, he talked about it numerous times, and once he referred to the 'Son of Man [giving] his life as a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:45) But, generally, he simply referred to the fact of it, alongside his resurrection (Mark 8:31-32, 9:31, 10:32-34). It was the early Christian writers like Peter or (especially) Paul who outlined the meaning of Jesus' death in much more detail.

Some have even used this kind of observation to suggest that the church invented Christianity, taking the events of Jesus' life and death and creating a Jesus to fit their vision – one that was never meant to have been interpreted in that way. In the hands of the most skilful writers, it even sounds plausible; there's only one small problem – it's just plain wrong. And this passage is the reason why.

The reason Jesus said so little about the purpose and meaning of his death is that *he didn't need to*. It had been explained very clearly hundreds of years beforehand – right here, in fact, in this passage. The sacrificial death of the Messiah for the sins of the world is described, unambiguously and repeatedly; indeed, the prophet says it four times in one verse alone (v5, italics mine): 'he was pierced for *our* transgressions, he was crushed for *our* iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace is on *him*, and by *his* wounds we are healed.'

In case we didn't get the message, he introduces this verse with: 'he took up *our* pain and carried *our* suffering' (v4); and summarises it with: 'the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of *us all*.' (v6) That's seven different ways of saying the same thing in three verses: the Messiah dies on our behalf, carrying the sin of the whole world – of you, me, everyone we love and our enemies, too – on his own shoulders. Even the nature of his death is described quite clearly (pierced, v5) as is his burial (in a rich person's tomb, v9).

The image of the lamb (v7) is also important, as it clearly evokes the language and theology of temple sacrifice: the unblemished substitute, which takes our sin away. But, unlike the lambs at the temple, it's not the end of the story: (v11) 'After his suffering, he will see the light of life.' Resurrection! To the first readers, this was the revolutionary bit – and it's clear that even Jesus' disciples didn't get it, either, six centuries later. But it is the final link in the chain. This is about more than just forgiveness, although it has to start there – this is about the restoration of our identity as bearers of the image of God, the opportunity to experience the abundant life we were always designed to enjoy. The Messiah is the firstfruits, in whom all his followers will also be made alive.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves; today, I invite us all simply to marvel, and to receive. Perhaps read one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' death and see how this extraordinary text is fulfilled so closely. And give thanks; 'he was pierced for our transgressions, ...and by his wounds we are healed.' Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever. Amen.

Day 28 – Isaiah 54:1-17 'The covenant of peace'

'So God created mankind in his own image.... God blessed them and said to them: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.... You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.'" (Genesis 1:27-28, 2:16-17)

One of the central themes of the bible – arguably *the* central theme – is that of covenant. A covenant is a binding promise based on love. It's not a contract, because contracts can be broken – rather it is unconditional, and these words (above) from the start of the bible spell out God's original covenant with humanity. Its intent can be summed up as follows: 'I will be your God, and you will be my people.' Or, to paraphrase, I will love you, provide for you, watch over you and lead you, all you have to do (in Adam and Eve's case) is obey one rule!

After the calamity of the Fall, God doesn't give up, though for a season he does regret the mess human beings had made of the world. So comes the Flood, after which God makes another covenant with Noah and his descendants: 'Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood.' (Genesis 9:11)

After this point, God makes renewed covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, all of which develop the fundamental idea of a loving, permanent relationship between God and his people. But it is the covenant with Noah which is referred to in our passage today: (v9) 'To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth.'

This is very significant language. The Flood was a one-off, a unique 'before and after' event: God would never again allow it to happen. And now, the Lord says – as we approach the climax of this extraordinary prophecy, which began way back in chapter 40 – the new thing I am doing is *just like that*. This moment is a before-and-after moment, these promises look forward to a completely new reality. We're never going back to this point (of total judgement of his people) again. It is, as the Lord himself calls it, a covenant of peace: (v10) "'my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the Lord, who has compassion on you.'

We often forget the word 'testament' is simply an old-fashioned word for covenant. When we talk about the New Testament of the bible, we mean (in modern language) new covenant. And this is it: what we've just marvelled at in chapter 53 is what becomes the new covenant – a covenant of peace (see 53:5 – the punishment that brought us *peace*). Indeed, as God says of those who will benefit from it: 'Great will be their peace.' (v13)

This peace is what God longs for each of us to have – a peace which transcends understanding, but which is the gift of a gracious and generous God. Whatever you face at the moment, take courage to ask the Lord for this peace – confident that it is his will and his promise. What better conclusion to our week of reflections than to close with the words we often use in our services: may the peace of the Lord be always with you...

Day 29 – Isaiah 55:1-7 'The great invitation'

It's been quite a journey – this amazing prophetic vision of Isaiah, which started in chapter 40 with the 'voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"' comes to a fitting conclusion today and tomorrow. Day after day we've marvelled at promise after promise; and we've heard another voice, the Divine Shepherd, calling his people to new hope and a new future. Today draws it all together with a simple invitation: come. Come to the Lord. Come, all who are thirsty – whether it's the water of life, the wine of salvation or the milk of nurture and growth (v1) – come. Receive the divine gift, the divine promise, without money and without cost.

It is an invitation not just to God's people, but also to the world. Just as we've seen at various other points in the text, this passage reminds us that it will be given, via God's people, to 'nations you know not' (v4). But it is one that requires a response; the prophet urges God's people to act, and not to put it off till a later date: (v6) 'Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.'

It's worth clarifying what the prophet means by this – and to do that, I'm going to ask you to picture a large hill or mountain. You are on a walk, trying to reach the summit, and you come to a fork in the path – ahead is the route direct to the summit: it may be a little steep, but it takes you straight there. Or you can turn to the left, to a path which seems to take you round the edge of the hill. It may ultimately get you to the summit via a more circuitous route, though you can't see at this point; but the point is, if you take that path, the summit doesn't move, *you* do.

This is why the prophet urges a response: it's not that God will move away... but *we* might. So, he urges, say your 'yes' today. Now is the time. Now is always the time. Call on him while he is near.

Fast forward 600 years, to Jerusalem, c.AD30. A controversial rabbi visits Jerusalem for one of the great annual Jewish festivals. St John takes up the story: 'On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink."' (John 7:37)

This is the prophet's vision made a reality; this is Isaiah 55:1 enacted by the One who is the fulfilment of this whole amazing section of scripture. All who are thirsty... let them come. To whom? To the Lord – the Lord Jesus, who is the one who gives us the water of life, the wine of salvation, the milk of nurture and growth.

It's the same invitation for us today – may we respond to that loving call. And not just today: day by day. Come. Come to Jesus – that we may live (v3), that we might receive his mercy (v7), and that he might show his splendour in us (v5). And may those streams of living water flow from us into a thirsty world, too. Amen.

Day 30 – Isaiah 55:8-13 'The fruitful word'

When he was a young preacher the great Christian leader and writer Dallas Willard would get very worried about delivering a sermon – would people like it? Would it bear fruit? While preparing one day, he received a word of encouragement from the Lord which dramatically changed his perspective and his future ministry: 'Don't worry – it's what I do between your lips and their ears that matters.'

Scripture is God's word – yes, it may have been given to humans, spoken out by humans and written down by humans, but, as St Peter puts it very well, people 'spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.' (2 Peter 1:21) This means two very important things, both of which the prophet reminds us of in this wonderful conclusion to his prophecy:

First, it means that these words have great *wisdom*: (v9) 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.' In other words, God says, if you're still struggling to believe everything I've shared through Isaiah, if some of it sounds crazy or just too good to be true, you can have confidence, because these are not just Isaiah's words, they are *my* words: this is the very wisdom of God. My way is higher, the Lord says, it's not bound by human constraints. We can trust it!

Second, it means that these words have great *power*. Lovely as it is to hear a good preacher hold forth, or a good writer weave beautiful literary tapestries, God's word doesn't need either to be effective, because it has power within itself: (v11) 'my word... does not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.'

It is also inherently fruitful: (v10) 'it yields seed for the sower, and bread for the eater.' Many years later, the greatest teacher of them all told a story about a farmer scattering this same seed. As long as it fell on good soil, it multiplied 30, 60 or even 100 times. One wonders where this great teacher got the idea from: could it be...?!

As we close this series, what better way than to be reminded that these are not just words, they are the wisdom and power of God. Everything Isaiah saw came to pass – history has shown that – but these words didn't end their purpose with their fulfilment in Christ. They remain living and active *today*. They can change our lives, too. Their hope is our hope. As we reflect on all we've learned over these last few weeks, may the Lord grant us grace to overflow with joy and peace (v12) – just as the Lord promised. Amen!