



TEXTS IN DIALOGUE

**„PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD!“
ISAIAH 40:1-26**

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Introduction

When I hear the words of the first chapter in the second half of the Book of Isaiah, I not only hear words and see images, but at the same time there is music. This “multi-sensual” connection may be even stronger for people from the Anglo-Saxon cultures than for Catholics from eastern Westphalia. What rises up within us first of all are the muted opening sounds of Georg Friedrich Händel’s “Messiah”, written in 1741.

After the first somewhat drawn-out first bars that move hesitantly, the quavers bring movement to the “symphony’s” music. The E-minor opening key is deliberately chosen. A characterization of the various keys from the year 1713 says: this key makes one very pensive, sad and sorrowful, “but in such a way that one can still hope to be comforted. Something fast-moving might be composed in it, but that doesn’t right away make it jolly.”

The tenor recitative that follows, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people”, then changes to E-major, a key that with all its new departure does not forget the thousands of tears shed (thus in a characterization from the beginning of the 19th century). The tenor aria “Ev’ry valley shall be exalted” remains in this transition key before the chorus proclaims “the glory of the Lord” in radiant A-major. This opening is exactly like that of an opera, and it translates into music the mood and movement of the biblical text, turning it into an unforgettable experience.

I. Orientation – a first Look at the Text

We just heard the text. It speaks to us with its many demands and its strong images that are taken above all from nature. Nevertheless, particularly in the first half, it is not easy to keep the voices apart and to assign them their place. Who is speaking to whom here? So let’s look at it more closely.

The text is clearly divided into two large parts. In verses 1-11, God’s request to comfort his people is in the foreground. The second part (starting with verse 12) looks at the question: Who in fact is this God, who is so emphatically resolved to comfort (“who?” is the key word, cf. verses

12f.18.25). Or expressed again in other words: In the beginning is the message: "God wants to comfort!" Then the text confirms this information: "God can do it too!"

As clear, simple and "logical" as the text is in its entirety, the image becomes very differentiated if looked at more closely. Already with the opening verse, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem ...", those listening are placed into a complex situation of communication: God emphatically calls upon a group about whose identity we learn nothing to comfort his people; but as so often in the Bible, this message is not transmitted to the group through God's direct speech, but rather through a speaker who remains anonymous, who – in the context of the Book of Isaiah – is the prophet, who at other times as well speaks in God's Name. So the news of consolation is transmitted by way of a "cascade of communication" from God (1) by way of the prophet (2) to a group (3), which is to pass it on to the people (4). Thereby is emphasized that God is in a close relationship with the group and with the people ("my people" – "your God", which is a variation on the covenant formula). This relationship is the foundation for the consolation: God does not abandon his people, God remains faithful – over and beyond sin and guilt.

In the next verse, "my people" is then exchanged for "Jerusalem". That is far more than the name of a city; it is as it were the concretization of the people through whom the estrangement from God and the consequent destruction and loss of freedom in the Babylonian exile became visible (cf. Isa 39:6f.).

The implementation of the commission to comfort begins then right away in the next section of the text (Isa 40:3-5): "A voice cries out." The voice calls upon the group that we already know from the first section and that was not described more clearly, and at the same time, the voice allows itself to be recognized as a member of this group ("our God", verse 3). "This voice belongs to God's party", as Jan Fokkelman aptly expressed it. The consolation does not consist merely of words, not only in the announcement that the forced labour is over. That is already much, but the issue here is something spectacularly new: in the desert that is generally impassable, a processional route is to be built, so to speak a highway for God, who is returning to Juda, as we learn farther down in verses 9 and 10. Nothing can remain as it was: what is high will become low and what is low will be raised up. That's how it always is when God comes! Here, I would only refer back to Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who could sing a song about that (cf. 1 Sam 2:1-10). When God comes to his people, one miracle after the other occurs ... In Isa 40, this is expressed in the succinct formula which says that "the glory (Hebr. the *kabod*) of God" is revealed. Not only the insiders perceive something like that, it happens in the sight of "all flesh". The closing sentence in verse 5 permits another interpretation as well: When this transformation of the desert occurs, all can see "that God has spoken". God's coming and the transformation of the world are a proof of God's words.

I shall now skip verses 6-8, but will soon return to them. In the fourth section of the first part, verses 9-11, we can see the continuation of the monologue that began in verse 3 (I have shown this in the hand-out by choosing a different font for the piece in between in verses 6-8). Now Jerusalem, as the "herald of good tidings", is called upon to announce God's coming to the cities of Juda. I cannot dwell on the text's artistic form, or its play on words and its rhetorical images, which make up what is special in this beginning of the new exodus. For example, the word for "herald of good tidings" echoes the word "flesh" (the homonym root b-š-r): Jerusalem/Zion is placed between the divine rays and the "flesh".

Whoever is a little familiar with the Bible can hear in the two short designating sentences ("Behold ... behold ...") God's revelations to Moses: in the burning bush (Ex 3), God not only revealed God's mysterious Name, but at the same time God's connection with the original parents and with Moses, and with him, the connection with the people; God is not only God, God is *their*

God. Finally, in the second revelation in the Book of Exodus, when everything is at stake because the people have turned away, God himself calls out his saving Name twice before Moses, because in this Name both are included, God's will for justice and God's inexhaustible mercy and fidelity (cf. Ex 34:6f.).

This God – yes, HE! – is coming!

The new road across the desert is going to be built for a king. Verse 10 expresses this in well-known images. But this theme of the king goes on immediately to the metaphor of the shepherd, which in the Ancient East is connected with the image of the king. *This* God is coming as the “good shepherd”, who brings his “flock” with him and who is particularly concerned with the animals in need of protection. *This* power gives itself as tender and raises up what is weak. Thus the movement ends with an image of *Shalom*. God wants to return to Zion, and God brings those in exile along with him. Here in Isa 40, the new is only being announced. There is merely a hint of how difficult its realization is; the harshness of the journey becomes visible in what follows in the Book of Isaiah.

In my rapid perusal of the text, I left aside the verses 6-8 in the third section. The passage brings another tone into the bright colours. Again “the voice” is heard, but this time it receives an answer from someone who is not named. To use the language of drama, in these verses a side stage is opened up for a short dialogue. Two expressions in verse 5 are the peg on which to hang this “sceptical” response; in the German translation this cannot be recognized; verse 6b again takes up the expression “all flesh”. Grass can be so plentiful, but when the hot desert wind goes over it, nothing remains. After all, that is what was and is over and over again experienced with the people. There is nothing reliable there. Reliability can only be found with God (again it says “our God”), and in fact, “in God's Word”; thus verse 8b takes up the end of verse 5 (in Hebrew, the words “word” and “speak” come from the same root).

In Isaiah 40:1-11, two broad strands of meaning begin: chapter 40-48 speaks of the big political change that made a happy return home from Babylon possible; chapters 49-55 look at the “new construction” of Jerusalem as a “city of peace” (cf. Isa 54f.). But every future and every success depends on the divine Word, which creates what is new and which goes beyond human plans (cf. Isa 55:6-13).

Such “good tidings” do not only need strong voices that proclaim them, but also a solid foundation of credibility. That is why the second main part of the text, verses 12-26, struggles (I am not looking at the chapter's last verses, as they are not part of the Haftarah). These verses struggle because the four sections (verses 12-17. 18-20. 21-24 and 25-26) are structured according to the same pattern. We know the pattern from school: it is the question-and-answer-game, except that the “questions” are not “real”, but rather already point out the greatness and might and incomparability of the God of Israel, and these are then further developed in the “answers”. God's incomparability, which is concentrated in the expression “the Holy One” (verse 25) in the next to the last verse, is given profile by contrasting it to the Nations (verse 15) and “rulers” (verse 23) and then by contrasting it to the idols (verse 19) and the stars (verse 26). Israel's God cannot be grasped in these powers and they are not equal to God. As in the great finale of the Book of Job (Job 38-42), what is at stake is a new attitude to reality that is made possible by looking to God. Whoever can look to God and to God's possibilities, finds a consolation that until then had not been known, a new life: “They shall mount up with wings like eagles.” (Isa 40:31)

II. An effective biblical Text – also in our World

This poetically powerful text does not fail to effect those who hear it. Already the announcement of liberation can mark a first stage in the struggle for freedom. When the oppressed take just a little courage, everything has already changed.

One of the most famous speeches of the 20th century is inspired by Isa 40 at its decisive point. The story is told that during the March of the Nations on August 28, 1963, when the 100 years since the proclamation of emancipation were to be remembered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King's speech did not move the public with its political and juridical reflections. King demanded of his audience in rather pale words that they continue in spite of all resistance, that they go home knowing that "somehow the situation can and will be changed". The speech, which was not very emotional, had already gone on for ten minutes when, in a slight pause for breath, a fellow woman activist called out softly to King: "Tell them your dream!" She repeated this a second time – and then, having noticed that no spark had been kindled, King laid aside his manuscript, looked at his audience, and changing his tone of voice and his style said: "And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow I have a dream." There then follows the list of "dreamed" concrete changes in the living conditions of African Americans, which has become famous. The series of "I-have-a-dream-passages" leads into a quotation of Isaiah 40:4-5 in the King James Version, with only very small changes:

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted,
and every hill and mountain shall be made low,
the rough places will be made plain,
and the crooked places will be made straight;
and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
and all flesh shall see it together."

And King ends this creed with the words: "This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with."

The biblical image of a transformed creation, the world of images in Isaiah 40 as a whole, did not let go of the speaker Martin Luther King. The good tidings, which also for King are first and foremost a message of freedom, must reach everyone as in the prophet Isaiah. King took up Isa 40:9 in a creative way:

And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.
Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.
...
Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.
From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

Isaiah 40 became the sub-text of the speech, its climax became a sermon, which drew the force of its language very decisively from the "gospel" of Isaiah. Thus King can maintain: "With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."

The "old" words of Scripture are not powerless and empty, they work what they were sent out to do (cf. Isa 55:11). In Martin Luther King's speech, we can recognize that the language of concrete juridical or socio-political demands is not enough for visions which change the world. It is necessary to go beyond such language; what is needed is a poetical "charge" that anticipates a goal that opens up a horizon that aims at something "beyond" which cannot be determined and calculated. The Bible gives us such images, which we neither can nor should grasp conceptually. In these images the possibility of passing beyond the world that is, opens up: They lead into God's wide open spaces. They are one way in which, ever anew, God works creatively among us.

III. A Help in articulating the Christian Message

It is no coincidence that the New Testament picks up Isa 40; this chapter is one of the few from which the DNA of the New Testament was so to speak created.

Already in the formal sense, the New Testament writes into the “cascade of communication” that I described above: God, who through God’s messengers gives to a group a message for the people and for all flesh. In the so-called second ending of the Gospel according to Mark, the risen Lord says to his disciples: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.” (Mk 16:15)

If I – admittedly somewhat boldly and very sweepingly – describe the New Testament as communication of the Gospel, I want to remind you that the New Testament concept “*euangelion*” is formed following the Greek translation of “herald of good tidings” in Isa 40:9 (Greek: *euaggelizomenos*; cf. Isa 52:7) (cf. 1 Cor 9:12; 2 Cor 9:13; 10:14, Mk 1:14 and others). It was only later that this term, following the title in Mk 1:1, became a name for a New Testament and an early Christian literary genre.

Luther’s striking description of *euangelion* shows very clearly that it is inspired by Isaiah: “However, *euangelion* means nothing other than a sermon and a writing about the grace and mercy of God ... And it is not really that which is written in books and composed of letters, but rather more an oral sermon and a living word, and a voice that rings out in the whole world and becomes publicly proclaimed, that one hears everywhere.” [*“Evangelion aber heysset nichts anderes, denn ein predig und geschrey von der genad und barmhertzigkeytt Gottis ... Und ist eigentlich nicht das, was ynn büchern stehet und ynn buchstaben verfasst wirtt, sondern mehr ein mundliche predig und lebendig wortt, und eeyn stym, die ynn die gantze welt erschallet und offentlich wirt ausgeschryen, das mans uberal höret.”*] (WA 12.259)

The message of consolation is taken up in the prologue to the Gospel according to Mark (Mk 1:1-13). This is not just an allusion to the Bible; rather, the Isaiah text here develops a great power, which forms a text and a meaning. This is all the more noteworthy because the beginning of every text is particularly important for the whole. The start gives the listeners basic information for understanding the whole.

The first verses of the Gospel according to Mark say:

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
 ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight.’
John the baptizer appeared
in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism ...”

It is hardly possible to begin more succinctly and more thought-provokingly. The Gospel of Jesus is announced, and Jesus is defined more closely in a double way as Messiah and as Son of God, so he immediately receives two titles of honour that have a great “background”, for in the Hebrew Bible these titles are very loaded. And all that in the shortest possible way. Not a word too many!

Thus Mark shifts all the weight onto the quotation from Isaiah, which however is given the wrong title! For the first half of the quotation is a cross between Ex 23:20 and above all Mal 3:1. Academically speaking, this would be incorrect, a questionable plagiarism, but in the Bible this is done repeatedly, because what is at stake is quality and not originality – and in any case, every-

thing that is quoted has one single “originator” (= author), God himself. Isaiah stands for God’s promise, which *alone* makes the experience with Jesus legible. In the past, one spoke here quickly of “fulfilment” of the word of the prophet, and with that was connected the idea of “exactly that and only that was meant – and now the Word of God is so to speak over and done with”. This, however, ignores the force of God’s Word, which does not become “over and done with”.

The fact that the person calling is then himself in the desert and that it does not say as in the Hebrew Bible, “in the desert prepare a way”, goes back to the Septuagint’s independent division of the sentence in Isa 40:3. This has consequences, for now the whole opening scene of the Gospel according to Mark takes place in the desert. So we are not in Babylon, as in Isa 40, but in the desert – like Israel at the time of its beginning. Mark gives the anonymous voice in Isa 40:3 a name and so to speak a professional identity: it is John, who is shown to be a prophet and who “proclaims”, as is said twice. He draws attention to Jesus as with a zoom: “after me ... one; not I ... but he ...”

So what is the purpose of going back to Isaiah right at the beginning of Mark? The quotation is exceptional already in the formal sense, for this is the only time in the Gospel according to Mark when a biblical quotation appears at the level of the narrator (so not in figurative speech). Even before Jesus himself appears, God’s Word has once again become reality. Mark is talking about the “way for the Lord”. He wants to show how God comes to his people. That is the Gospel, the message of consolation and joy. Already here, by the way, is announced that the motif of the way, which turns up twice in the mixed quotation, will take on a key function in the Gospel. This is the case right up until the last lines of this Gospel, when the disciples of Jesus are sent back to the beginning – renewed through messengers from the world of God. Before that, everything was running on an anti-program to Isa 40:3: the way was neither smooth nor open.

And something else becomes clear with this beginning of the Gospel: nobody understands on his or her own who Jesus is. For that, one immediately needs a twofold hermeneutic, as Mark carefully tells us right away at the beginning: on the one hand, a person is needed who takes himself back in order to point to Jesus, who becomes *diaphan*, transparent, and on the other hand, we need “what is written”, for, as Mark surely thinks, “God does not do anything before revealing it first to his servants, the prophets” (cf. Am 3:7). In other words: There is no path that reaches Jesus, which bypasses Israel and Israel’s Sacred Scripture.