

## ADVENT 2 ISAIAH 40

It was a hard life. Every day Amanda woke up and turned over in bed to make sure that he had gone. Not that there would be peace for long. Working on a farm deep in the countryside always meant early rising, but it also meant a return for a cooked break-fast, and regular returns throughout the day as he moved from field to field, or brought the cattle in. Amanda never knew when he would return,.

It was always a struggle to get out of bed on a Saturday, after he had been down to the pub on the Friday night, spending what little money they had, and boasting about how he ran a tight ship, kept everything under control, no worries about Amanda and credit cards, or anything else ....always said with a knowing wink.

He was proud of the control, even when it did spill over into rough treatment when he had had a few. He always apologised in the morning, even when it had been particularly bad would bring her a cup of tea at daybreak, when all Amanda wanted to do was to shut out the light, stay in the healing warmth of the bed.

It had all started so well. He seemed so well set up, so strong, and that was what thought she needed in her life after a series of disastrous boyfriends.

They hadn't been able to have children, and he blamed her for that, you are paying for your past, he often said, not in company mind, although those were rare occasions.

Amanda wondered how she could go on, the future just looked so bleak stretching into middle age and beyond. And there was always the fear that one day he would really hurt her, after all on one occasion when she had stood up to him, he had waved the twelve bore around as a warning.

She couldn't see a way out.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people  
says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Whenever I hear those words I am drawn immediately into the Music of the Messiah [If you have a sound system over which the this aria could be played use it]

Handel had a wonderful facility with melody and words. And we will all have our favourites, from the almost anarchic bounce of 'All we like sheep have gone astray' to the calm and soaring assurance of 'I know that my redeemer liveth'

As we know, Isaiah spoke to a people in exile, far from 'home' and longing for return. There is a sense in this passage of the prison term having been completed, of the need for remission and return.

The message here, is not that the Israelites have simply paid a debt and therefore *deserve* pardon. Rather, the intention is that God views the suffering of the exiles as an acceptable sacrifice. The nation justly deserved the punishment of exile. God had no obligation to do anything more. It was by His gracious choice that He willingly accepted their suffering as atonement for their iniquity and by that offered pardon. He has simply said, "It is enough."

The people did not *earn* the shift from wrath to mercy introduced here; God *granted* it. A better reading might be "her punishment has been accepted" or even "her guilt has been pardoned" corresponding directly to her hard service has been completed. This idea of 'atoning' suffering first appears in the Bible here, during the crisis of exile.

Amanda 's story is fiction but drawn from the experiences of many women, especially in rural areas, who have less opportunity for support than in an urban setting. Equally Amanda feels guilty about her situation, which often fuels the way in which an abuser seeks to maintain control.

Is there any hope for her, for a return to a loving relationship in which she can flourish, can feel at home, and experience what she hoped to experience with her husband?.

This Diocese is running a training programme to raise awareness of the problems caused by Domestic Violence. The accepted definition of Domestic Violence includes the sort of psychological control exercised over Amanda. The Diocesan programme is now moving to train those who are prepared to support folk like Amanda, and then to provide more specialised training for those who might work with Amanda's husband. You will have seen the posters in the porch, and contact details.

Our role as a Parish Church is to bring comfort outside these four walls to whoever needs it. This is one of the ways in which we can minister to the community around us.

Amanda might not be in exile, but she might as well be, and this is true for so many victims whose life, and sometimes their children's lives, are put on hold, as they wait for the next occasion the violence flares, or prevented by control from participating in the community in the way you or I expect to.

We are the hands and feet of our Lord Jesus, and so we should read the words of the final verse in our reading this morning as if they apply to us.

WE tend his flock like shepherds: WE gather the lambs in our arms and carry them close to our hearts; WE gently lead those that have young.

Let us pray.