

Bennoch church: 5th February 2012

You will have seen these kinds of pictures / scenes of Scottish mountains, viewed as a high flying bird would see it, sometimes used as a backcloth for programs on Scottish history or used in tourism adverts.

It is the image of a bird that soars high in the sky, using the thermals of the wind to glide, not seemingly concerned with what is going on the ground below, part of creation, yet at the same time distant from all its noise and business, and think of the perspective that you get, the wider vision of what lies all around you.

In Isaiah 40 we find ourselves in the 6th century BC. Jerusalem lies in ruins, destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC and the leading citizens have been exiled to Babylon and have been there for roughly 50 years. But this great empire is on the verge of collapse, soon to be destroyed by the Persians. So we have this sometimes hopeful and sometimes despondent Jewish community wondering and questioning God, have we been punished by God and cast into exile for ever? Has God just left us here in the midst of this foreign power? What is to become of us? What hope do we have for the future?

In steps one of the disciples of the great prophet Isaiah with words of encouragement for the people. He started with these great words... (40: 1-2) He says, in the desert of Babylon here is hope. In the passage read this morning the prophet makes what seem to be very obvious points, but remember the context. He says, God who has made all of creation and who knows each of the stars by name, knows all your troubles. Someone might have been tempted to interrupt and ask, well why he doesn't do something about it then! The prophet says, he will, for our God never gets tired, and he knows, even if you feel downcast, tired and weary, there is a promise to hold onto. (v31) The people of God have not been forgotten!

Tiredness is not always related to physical activity. That kind of tiredness can have a sense of achievement. My annual game of 5 aside football – I am still alive! The emotional stress of life can drain us. E.g. finishing an exam at University and moving from the buzz of knowing it is over to feeling really drained, or conducting the funeral of someone I knew really well. I once heard that preaching a sermon was as demanding as digging a hole. Not sure though the size of the hole!

We can think of times when we have felt emotionally drained and exhausted. That was the situation for the Jewish community in Exile in Babylon. We might say that they were actually spiritually drained, as they questioned God and doubted their future!

There are times in life when we do not feel that we are soaring high in the skies, in fact we feel the very opposite, wondering how we will cope with life in the here and now and questioning what is happening to us or others we know and care for. I believe quite firmly that God expects us to question him at such times and that doubt is as much a part of our discipleship as faith. One of my old professors at university wrote a book called *Courage to doubt*, the challenge of faith in difficult times, for the exiled Jewish community and for us.

Think of the eagle, as it soars high, can we use the wind of God to lift us up and carry us through the difficult times of life? As we soar in the strength of God, he says, look around, the earth below is small and the vision is wide. That is the perspective of faith.

To the Jewish exiles he says, I have the power of creation, greater than any army or nation on earth, so do not doubt that I can lead you home. To us, he says, trust in me, in me you will find your strength renewed and you will

rise on wings like eagles. Problems, anxieties and pain are never removed,
but God in Christ gives us the strength to carry on as he shares our load.

We can make these words our own (v31) Amen.