

Isaiah 40:21-42

- 21 Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
- 22 It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,
And its inhabitants are **like grasshoppers**,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain.
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.
- 23 He it is who reduces rulers to nothing,
Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless.
- 24 Scarcely have they been planted,
Scarcely have they been sown,
Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither,
And the storm carries them away like stubble.
- 25 "To whom then will you liken Me That I would be his equal?" says the Holy One.
- 26 Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars,
The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name;
Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power,
Not one of them is missing.
- 27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD,
And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God"?
- 28 Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth
does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable.
- 29 He gives strength to the weary,
And to him who lacks might He increases power.
- 30 Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly,
- 31 Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings **like eagles**,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary.

Grasshoppers and Eagles

This passage in Isaiah is a great favourite among Christians. No doubt you can quote parts of it by heart. This is appropriate it is a beautiful passage full of hope and promise. Today I want to look at two aspects of the passage which concern us at St Luke’s and in the other five congregations of St John’s Parish.

The first aspect I want to examine is the two contrasting metaphors of grasshoppers and eagles. The second aspect is the description of rising up, running and walking which is found in verse 31

The context of this passage

Whenever we look at a passage of Scripture we should always ask the question, “What did it mean to its original hearers?” This will give us a good indication of how we should apply it to our own lives.

Isaiah chapters 40 – 55, appear to address a situation later in the Babylonian exile (circa 540 BCE) when the prophet proclaims that God wants the people who have endured exile in Babylon since 587 to return to Jerusalem. Most of the older generation would have died, those who remained would have heard the stories of Jerusalem, but this generation would

be fairly comfortable, settled, living in a fertile and cultured country. They were safe, they had a certain amount of freedom and many obtained wealth.

The challenge is to get a group of people who are comfortable, settled, whose children are born in Babylon, to move back to the ruins of a city taken over by people from the surrounding countries, Edom, Moab, Transjordan etc. Why should they return to a land where there were no immediate opportunities for making a living?

This is the task of the writer of Isaiah 40-55 - to convince the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, the city and the walls again.

How this passage relates to our context?

First of all we all have our own comfort zones. When I was at Christ Church after 18 years I was in a very comfortable “comfort zone”. I knew what was expected of me and how to get things done. In fact, I could have stayed there for a lot longer - and only a few people would have complained! But God began prompting me to trust Him for something new. It was scary and uncertain but I knew that if I was going to experience God’s leading in my life I had to be prepared to get up and follow.

What is your comfort zone? Only you will know. I cannot tell you. It could be your unique way of doing things. It could be choosing the familiar instead of trusting God for the new. What is your comfort zone?

Grasshoppers and Eagles

Let’s look at the two metaphors of the grasshoppers (vs 22) and eagles(vs 31) before we look at the description of rising up, running and walking at the end of the passage.

Grasshoppers are insects that live close to the ground. In other words their view is fairly limited. Their world is made up of blades of grass and leaves. They are able to jump 20 times the length of their own body. If you or I could do that, we would be able to jump almost 35 metres! Even though most species can fly very well they spend most of their time on the ground.

The first point that becomes obvious from the grasshopper is that though they have great potential physically for movement and flight they tend to limit themselves by opting for less than their potential.

The lifespan of the grasshopper varies widely by species and can be greatly affected by environmental conditions. Most kinds of grasshoppers live for approximately three to five months. They do not have a long-term existence. Life is short-term. There is no need to plan ahead or to strategise for the future.

The second point that becomes clear is that not only is the grasshopper’s world limited by space it is also limited by time. Grasshoppers live for today only because their life expectation is so short.

Most grasshoppers lead relatively blameless lives, causing little harm to crops or gardens. However, some species of grasshoppers lead a "Jekyll and Hyde" existence, and can change into a very damaging form indeed, in which they congregate in huge swarms that can do severe damage to crops. One swarm in 1988 covered an area of 75 x 15 miles, contained (about) 150 billion locusts and was estimated to be eating 300,000 tons fresh green food per day.

The third point that we learn from the grasshopper is their potential for doing real damage. You and I share this attribute with the grasshopper. Though we seem to live fairly blameless lives our lack of vision and the way we conduct ourselves together can do real damage to the gospel and the Kingdom of God.

We need to break out of the grasshopper mentality which has such a limited vision of life. In the same way as the exiles in Babylon had to break out of their comfort zone in order to

be part of God’s great salvation plan. If they had not the Messiah would have come and they (as many Jewish people were in the time of Jesus) would still have been sitting 800 miles away from the action in Babylon.

The contrast to the grasshopper is the eagle. Actually the Hebrew word translated eagle is נֶשֶׁר *neshar*, sometimes translated “eagle,” is probably referring to the vulture as in Hosea's threat to Israel (Hosea 8:1) where the same Hebrew word is used. We do not have a very positive view of vultures and so the translators preferred eagle. I have had the privilege of standing at a place called Gamla in the Golan Heights and watching these vultures ride the thermals – it is an awesome sight. The Eurasian Griffon Vulture has a two and a half metre wingspan which it uses to great effect, so that their flight seems almost effortless. I imagine that it is these majestic creatures that Isaiah has in mind.

Unlike the grasshopper their view is unimpeded and unlimited. They have the big picture. They are not limited by a life which is short sighted and short term. They are able to see a great distance and take advantage of their position.

Unlike the grasshopper the vulture does not do damage – it conserves. Vultures, and other avian scavengers play a very important ecological role in clearing the veld of carcasses. By rapidly consuming remains of dead animals, vultures can prevent these carcasses from acting as host to various diseases that may spread to wild animals and to livestock.

Without the vulture the ecology would collapse.

So the difference between grasshoppers and vultures is a picture of the perspective God wants us to have in our service of him. Not small minded and earth bound but visionary and forward thinking. Always taking the long view.

The word translated to "wait" in Isaiah 40:31, Lamentations 3:25, and Psalm 27:14 is קָוָה *"qavah"*. Although “qavah” means "to wait upon" it also means, "to bind together (by twisting)." So it actually refers to the attitude, or the mind set of the one who waits. It is like a rope of three strands, The Lord’s will, the Word of God and my will bound together. The writer of Ecclesiastes puts it this way, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (Eccl 4:12)

Those who "wait upon the Lord", as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and David expressed it, would willfully bind themselves to God's will, in order to obey. Remember the Lord’s Prayer and Jesus binding His will to the Father’s in Gethsemane.(Matt 26:42).

From a Biblical perspective faith means having confidence and trust in God – a belief which is demonstrated in perseverance, a “steadiness” which endures and is not reliant on circumstances. Not so much blinding moments of ecstasy but steady faithfulness.

Isaiah 40:31

Yet those who wait for the LORD

Will gain new strength;

*They will **mount up** with wings like eagles (neshar),*

*They will **run** and not get tired,*

*They will **walk** and not become weary.*

Please notice the progression in this verse. Mount up, run, and the climax of the verse, walk! If most Christians had written this verse they would have put it the other way around. Walk, run, mount up, because we have this view of faith. Always looking for the spectacular, the avant-garde the unusual. The progression implied by this view of faith turns the Christian life into a consumable commodity. Yet the climax of this verse is *walking* without growing weary. What we need in the Church now is visionary leaders who know how to walk without growing weary. Leaders who do not grow bored with faithfulness but see it as the ultimate test of genuine faith.