



This week at Magdalen Road church we continued our series considering how Jesus is good news even for our current confused and changing culture. Over the six week period we are considering different threads or themes and examining them through the lens of the gospel.

This week we were thinking about safety. We began by noting how the 'helicopter parenting' concept from last week played into this; as we more intensively parent our kids (because there are fewer of them) so they are often protected from the messy painful reality of the world for a longer and longer period. As a society we also hugely value comfort, and are also exposed to a greater number of potential fears and safety concerns because of our use of the Internet.

All in all this means the younger generation can be incredibly safety conscious (even desiring to own a Volvo!). In one sense these things are good, however are more complex and problematic when we're not just talking about physical risk but also intellectual and emotional risk too. This has led to various things such as the creation of safe spaces on university campuses (places where groups can gather without fear of judgement), trigger warnings (people being advised in advance that you might be saying or teaching them something that challenges them) as well as micro aggressions (low-level words phrases or ideas that could be seen as offensive to some).

Another response to protect people from social or intellectual risk is to block controversial speakers - disinviting or de-platforming them. Recently hardly a week seems to go by in Oxford where there hasn't been the call for some speaker or lecturer to be silenced (eg <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/17364955.oxford-unions-latest-disgraceful-stunt-causes-more-outrage/> or <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jan/09/oxford-students-call-for-professors-removal-over-alleged-homophobia>).

All kinds of questions rise from this concept regarding free speech. Should it be allowed even if they might teach repugnant things to our current culture? Who gets to decide what is repugnant? How does academia function best in our increasingly diverse society?

We looked at a study (acting as a kind of metaphor) quoted in the 'Coddling of the American mind' - analysing how peanut allergies are exacerbated when peanuts are withdrawn entirely. Careful exposure on the other hand reduces the number of allergies and strengthens kids over the long-term. Rather than avoiding hard things perhaps we thrive with the kind of exposure therapy.

We also looked at the distinction between fragile (eg a china teacup), resilient (eg a plastic sippy cup) and anti-fragile (eg muscles and bones) where some systems actually depend upon stress to strengthen them. Just as bones and muscles are weakened when they're not used (and vice versa) so

humans are strengthened when we are put in stressful situations and have to deal with concepts or contexts that make us uncomfortable. Avoiding them is not necessarily a good thing in the long term - it may actually weaken us.

We then sought to consider this topic through the lens of the gospel as we focused on Isaiah 43:1-7.

We began by reminding ourselves that this side of the fall and the return of Jesus everybody suffers in some way all the time. That is the normal human life. While we may crave comfort and safety in this life, there is a sense in which it is never guaranteed for us.

The context of the Isaiah prophecy here is that the people of God are about to be exiled from the land because of their disobedience. The previous generations have had no sense of sin or of God and so he is about to discipline them:

+ Security in impending trouble (v1-4)

Gods response to his peoples sin is to punish them (He is not safe!) but stunningly still to provide for and protect them. In v1 We see he created and formed them, but as well as that he is redeemed them. Redemption is a process whereby someone is rescued or bought out of captivity, for example, at a cost. God had already rescued and redeemed his people from Egypt many centuries before - but this example here seems to be a future redemption - he uses the past tense because he is so sure it will happen. We see in v3 to 4 that he is willing to pay a lot to redeem his people and buy them back. Even Egypt or Cush or Seba - Just as we are willing to splash out on the people we love, so because God's people are so precious to him he would pay anything for them. As Isaiah continues it becomes clear quite how much he will pay as he is prepared to give his servant, his son, the Lord Jesus.

What is striking here is it even on their way into exile v2 - God will be with and protect his people - The waters won't swamp or drown them and the fires won't set them ablaze. Even in exile he is still with them and has got them.

These truths are important for us as we chew over the reality of a fearful world where safety and comfort are increasingly of paramount importance. There is a sense in which because God is always with his people so ultimately we are always in a 'safe-space' - that doesn't mean at times life won't hurt (we're people who always suffer all the time!) but it does mean eternally he has us in his sovereign plans. We need not be anxious or fearful.

+ Certainty of future hope (v5-7)

The scope of this prophecy has just exploded as he looks ahead to a gathering of the people of God. However now it is from the east, the west, the north and the south, more than just the return of the exilic community but rather a drawing in of men and women from all over the globe. This is not just Israel in exile this is the gospel going to the ends of the Earth and the church being gathered.

And just as the command in v1 was to not fear, so again the imperative for us in v5 is to not be afraid. Throughout the Scriptures God's people are sent into different exiles, they are often away from home and it is scary and hard. Whether in Babylonia or Persia or Assyria, or even for us as God's people who are exiles and strangers (1Peter) in a land that is not our own - in exile the people of God are always to remember who he is, to remember who we are and so to not be afraid because we are eternally safe in him.

+ Here are a few questions to start of the discussion in your group:

Where have you seen the safety consciousness of our current society? Where do you see it in your own life?

Where is safety a good thing and where is it a bad thing? We didn't mention health and safety in the workplace, but where do you think this is helpful? And where is it perhaps unhelpful?

What do you make of the idea of the increasing need for emotional safety? What are the implications of this? Should (so-called) hate speech be illegal? Why or why not? Should the Oxford Union continue to invite controversial speakers?

What do you make of the idea of fragility, resilience and anti-fragility? Where have you seen this in your life? What happens if we are not exposed to difficult things?

In the Isaiah passage the people of God are being disciplined because God is in a sense not 'safe' - he is pure and holy and there are consequences for the sin of his people. How does the purity and holiness of God affects our understanding of safety from a biblical perspective?

In v1 to 4 where do we see Gods concern and care for his people, even in the midst of him exiling them? What does it mean to redeem people? Why does God redeem his people?

How does his treatment of them here, help us in our thinking about safety and comfort?

As the prophecy expands in v5 to 7 - what do we see being described here? What is the command for this expanding group of people? When do you feel fearful?

How do these concepts help us as we carefully think through how to live in our current world? In what ways are we safe? Why does this not mean the life and always be easy though, or comfortable?