Isaiah 40: 18-31

Isaiah speaks to the exiles in Babylon - to people who have lost their sense of where they are and of God's meaningful presence in their lives. So he asks, 'Have you not known? Have you not heard?' They are people who literally do not know where they are and have lost a sense of where God is.

Paddy set the aim of this Conference: to help people to understand more clearly the interface between the church and the secular world, and to discover how we can be more effective in bridging the gaps. So we are thinking about the secular society and how we interact with it.

In that sense we can see ourselves as living in the world like exiles - like people who are at risk of losing a sense of who we are and where we are, And what this conference is about is about an attempt to bridge gaps in a way which rekindles in us a sense of God's meaningful presence.

But that's a rather adversarial understanding of the relationship between the church and the secular world - for some suggest that this is a narrative which the church has actually invented to explain its own decline. And some of what Linda suggested to us yesterday - about the growing liberalism of our society - suggests that there is much about secular society which we should be happy to affirm. And my background leads me to be a passionate advocate of secular society - Northern Ireland with its religion compromised by sectarianism needed secular society. For a small church like ours, secular society gradually dissolves tired denominational loyalties and opens up for us missional opportunities.

But, if there is a positive side, there are also less positive aspects to e secular society. I think that the secular is extraordinarily powerful. It squeezes meaning out of the world. It tells us that there is nothing more than we can see. It mocks with indifference the idea of God who is not just present but dynamically active in the world.

I find in myself a constant struggle not to be or to act as a secular person - a struggle not to be matter of fact but to be spiritually alive; to be functional and managerial when I should be obedient; to be world weary to the point of cynical when I should be expectant and hopeful; to be experienced and knowledgeable when I should be prayerful

Isaiah tells the people that God is the energising power in their lives - transformative in them so that they can be transformative in their context. May God be so for us.