

People in Cameron reach out to the needy in many ways, especially as Christmas approaches. Programs like Toys for Tots, the Angel Tree at the prison and the Ministerial Alliance Adopt-a-Family help connect willing givers with families or individuals who would not otherwise have a merry Christmas. Beyond our community people assist in other efforts. Bread for the World lobbies congress for legislation that feeds the hungry. Amnesty International organizes letter-writing campaigns to free prisoners of conscience around the world. The Christmas spirit inspires people to share with those who have less.

A foreshadowing of that spirit appears in today's first reading. The people of Israel have been carted off into exile, far from their homeland, in the hands of captors, who used them like slaves. They had little hope.

It was to these people that this prophecy is addressed. "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end." God was going to free the Israelites from their captivity and let them go home. A voice cries out: "In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!" The prophet imagines that the valleys will be filled in, the mountains will be made low, rugged land shall become a plain, and the rough country a broad valley. God is creating a new exodus. Just as, 600 years or so before this event, God had brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt and let them cross the desert into the promised land, so now God would bring Israel out of Babylon and back home again. These words are quoted famously in the gospel, as they are put in the words of John the Baptist. They are also quoted famously by the musician George Friedrich Handel, who quoted them to open his famous oratorio, *Messiah*.

Isaiah imagines a road, or a way. He asks people to prepare a way for the Lord to rescue them. John the Baptist asked people to prepare a way for Jesus to enter. Jesus called himself the way, the truth and the life, and early followers called Christianity "the way". To follow Christ is to prepare a way, to raise valleys, lower mountains and allow God to enter our hearts.

People who support charitable efforts at Christmas are doing just that. They are preparing a way for Christ to come. They speak a message of comfort to those who have little. The spirit of Christmas is not just about shopping, it's about bringing comfort to anyone who doubts the presence of God, who has lost a dream, or who feels lonely. Give comfort to my people, says God, and prepare a way for the Lord.