Because I have spent almost the whole of my life as either a student or a teacher, I tend to think of the Labour Day weekend as marking the beginning of a new year. Most students ordinarily look forward with a mixture of expectation and trepidation to a new academic year, especially when it involves a change of schools or a new level of education. They are often excited about renewing friendships or starting new ones. This will be even more the case this year after the upheavals and the on-line learning of the past 18 months.

This weekend at St Michel’s College in the University of Toronto where I have lived and taught for the last 50 years, those who will be in residence in the coming year are moving in while the members of the first year class are participating in orientation week.

In all probability the coming year will be a challenging one for students and parents as well as for faculty and staff. Most of the larger classes will be on line while the smaller ones will be in person. Because no one can really know what things will be like in three or four months, there is a certain amount of hesitation, worry, and fear among some about what the future holds and that, in spite of all the efforts of the University to do its utmost to protect everyone from becoming infected with the COVID 19 virus.

Given all this, I couldn’t help but be struck by how relevant today’s reading from Isaiah is. God urges the prophet to say to “those who are faint of heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God.’”

Today’s reading contains one of several passages in the second part of the book of Isaiah that strike the same note. It is the time of exile, a time in which the people of Jerusalem and Judah have suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Babylonian empire. Their city and with it, the great temple built by Solomon, the heart of the religious life of the Israelites, have been destroyed and many of the inhabitants of the city driven into exile. The result for many has been depression and despair. Their experience has led them to believe that God has abandoned them.

In order to reignite as it were the faith and hope of the people, the prophet speaks of a future time in which God will intervene on their behalf, bringing them back to their homeland and inspiring them to rebuild what has been destroyed and to renew the social and religious life taken away from them.

To suggest the depth and range of the renewal that awaits them, the prophet imagines God healing all those suffering from disabilities of one kind or another. He becomes poetic in his description of what will take place: “The eyes of the blind shall be opened,” he says “and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the mute sing for joy.” The transformation that is coming, the prophet declares, will embrace nature as well as human life. “Waters,” he says, “shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.”

The Gospel from which we have ordinarily been reading this year is that of Mark. It is the shortest of all the Gospels mainly because it has much less of the teaching of Jesus than the others. Today’s reading is typical. In response to the request of friends of a man who can neither hear nor speak, Jesus heals him so that his “ears are opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly.”

With this and all the other miracle stories that Mark recounts, he is showing us what Jesus means when he says that with him the Kingdom or reign of God is breaking into the world. Because it involves forgiveness and healing, and the renewing of human life in all its dimensions, it is called “good news.”

As understandable as our concerns and fears are as we begin a new moment in our struggle with the pandemic, today’s readings invite us to reflect on God’s continuing presence to us and ours to him. No matter what our situation is, we are neither alone nor abandoned. ”Be strong, do not fear,” the prophet urges us, “here is your God.”

Trust in God’s presence in no sense justifies not taking seriously our responsibility to ourselves and to one another to do what we can to offset and contain the destructive power of the pandemic. I, like most of you, am not a scientist. I depend for my information on public health officials and on the scientific community, especially on those who are recognized for their research in areas relevant to understanding and counteracting viral infections.

Even as we do what we can, we do it with the assurance that, come what may, we are in the hand of God. It is this conviction that enables us to hear and respond to the prophet’s challenge to be strong and not to fear.