

“Comfort in Suffering”

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 7 November 2004 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	2 Corinthians 1:3-11
<u>Reading</u>	2 Corinthians 1:3-11 John 15:18-25
<u>Hymns</u>	9, 16, 94 from Mission Praise
<u>Songs</u>	40, 37, 6, 72 from Mission Praise
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I am sure that none of you would disagree that our world is full of suffering.

From the plight of the Sudanese Civil war,
the peoples of Iraq and Palestine,
the near starvation of many in the African continent,
the refugee camps dotted all over the third world,
and the forgotten wars in Chechnya,
the Philippines, and elsewhere;

to the vast numbers of those in prosperous countries who suffer from depression and
mental breakdown
caused by the pressures of modern industrial lifestyles,
the persecution of Christians, Muslims, Sheikhs, Buddhists and others
who live in countries where they are the minority
and the governments do not subscribe to freedom of religion;

to the anguish of families of victims of crime,
victims of accidents and personal disputes,
victims of people trafficking, slavery,
girls and children forced or sold into prostitution,
suffering is a part of our world.

Pick up any newspaper and read it with any feeling
and it is easy to allow gloom and despondency to bow you down
as you read of case after case anywhere in the world,
where people suffer injustice and cruelty,
hardship and pain,
disaster and illness,
loss of their homes, their businesses, or their livelihood,
disability and death.

And these things affect us all.
Shielded though we are in this green and pleasant corner of the British Isles from the majority of these things,

we feel their impact daily.

Each of us in our own way can point to some area of our lives,
where we too suffer,
whether it be overwork or unemployment,
broken or dysfunctional relationships,
depression, either mild or severe,
recurrent illness or permanent disability
or even the burden of grief and care of a loved one affected by these things.

And many, both Christians and non-Christians alike ask the inevitable question:
“Why?”.

Why, if there is an all-powerful, benevolent God of love,
does he allow such things to happen in his creation?
Why dose he not punish and destroy
those who perpetrate man’s inhumanity to man?
Why does he not placate the elements
and change this world into a mild and pleasant planet,
with no deserts, no floods, no storms, no catastrophes.

Why, if evolution and science have brought us this far
can we not educate ourselves,
limit our propensity to violence,
control the planet on which we live,
and learn to live in peace with one another.

And the answers are as numerous as the questions,
yet none of them, or so it seems, provides a solution.

For the Christian, the Bible provides some clues.
As a result, a few whose walk is particularly close to God accept these in faith
and are able to move forward, knowing that they do not fully understand.
Others claim to fully understand and have definitive answers;
But the vast majority of us still find the whole subject bewildering and
inconclusive,
and our faith is tried daily as we seek to trust in God,
even though we do not understand his ways.

The secularist has some answers.
We know, (or think we know) why there is a rapid increase in skin cancer
amongst Australians.
We know (or think we know) why the ice caps are melting, the glaciers
are receding and the world climate is changing.
We know why thousands and thousands of refugees live out a meagre
existence in refugee camps dotted around the world.
Yet even the secularist has no solution.

Suffering can be divided into two broad categories:

On the one hand, that caused by man;

And on the other, that for which man cannot be held responsible,
and hence has to be attributed to nature,

Satan

or God,

depending on your world view,

your faith

and your belief system.

Though many would argue that when cause & effect are taken into account,
these categories overlap.

For instance.

If we accept, as many do, that the burning of fossil fuels has led to global warming,
which is melting the ice caps

and this in turn has caused unusually high tides and storms

causing floods for example in Bangladesh,

then the suffering of those poor people can attributed to man rather than to
nature.

Looked at in this way,

then the vast majority of suffering in our world today

is either directly or indirectly attributable to man.

In other words,

we have only ourselves to blame

But does this make it easier to bear?

Not at all.

For added to our pain

are the haunting feelings of helplessness,

anger,

revenge and retribution

and even guilt.

But is all of this relevant to our passage this evening

and conversely is our passage this evening relevant to us.

I believe that it is.

It is clear that the Corinthian Christians had had their share of problems -

problems which had caused them pain -

and they were not 'out of the wood' yet.

They had experienced many difficulties

and much strife in the church.

They had had serious sexual misconduct,

disruptive services,

false teachers preaching a different gospel

and undermining and slandering the apostle Paul himself.

Paul had had to write harshly to them

and had even paid them a visit which had gone sadly wrong.
On top of all this they would be suffering persecution and opposition from outside the church

as in that era, idolatry was the majority religion
and Christians faced considerable personal and corporate antagonism.

Hence both Paul and they had had,

and were continuing to have a tough time.

As far as we can judge much of the sin had been removed,

but the false teachers – the so-called ‘super-apostles’ - were still there
and the external pressures were still there too.

So Paul’s message in the opening verses of this letter is one of comfort.

But he also wants them to know that he is very familiar with suffering in the cause of the gospel.

So let’s continue on the theme of suffering

and come back to the subject of comfort later.

In verses 8 & 9 of our passage the apostle refers to ‘the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia’.

He says they were under great pressure, far beyond their ability to endure so that they thought they were going to die.

No-one is quite sure what hardships Paul is referring to here,

but as far as I can see,

the events recorded in the book of the Acts fit this perfectly well.

You may remember how Paul & Barnabus were hounded out of Iconium;

in Lystra Paul was stoned and left for dead;

in Ephesus Paul was mobbed.

He could have referred to other incidents:

The disagreement he had with Barnabus;

Paul & Silas were thrown into prison in Philippi;

The rejection of his message in Athens,

and much more.

Paul knew all about hardship in the name of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes it is necessary for the people of God to know just how much those who stand in the front line have had to suffer,

what sacrifices have had to be made

in order to present the gospel in the first place

and then to maintain the ministry and life of the Church as it grows
or declines.

From time to time,

Paul resorts to this

to show them how much has to be suffered in the cause of Christ.

In an article in the Times on Thursday of this week (see the cover story in T2 dated 4 November 2004) Carol Midgely reports on the growth of what she calls spirituality (essentially interest in New Age and mystic meditation) at the expense of religion (essentially Christian belief and practice)

In it she quotes Professor Paul Heelas,
a specialist in religion at Lancaster University,
saying that “a lot of the comfort in religion is in postponement –
a better life after death.
But belief in Heaven is collapsing,
so people believe it is more important to know themselves
and make themselves better now”.

The analysis is spot-on.
Christianity is a suffering religion.
But in today’s ‘me first’ society,
the idea of a suffering religion is anathema
and those seeking a spiritual experience will look to that which gives
satisfaction now
rather than something which purports only to lead to hardship now,
with a glorious future, Heaven knows when!

When the young Saul was converted on the road to Damascus,
the Lord sent Ananias to release him from his blindness.
Does anyone remember what the Lord said to Ananias? (Acts 9:15-16)
He said “Go, this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name
before the Gentiles
I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”
Suffering was his destiny.

Back in John’s Gospel, Jesus told his disciples that suffering was their destiny too. (John 15:18-25)
Read John 15:18-20a

Jesus predicted that he would be betrayed to the Chief Priests, (Mark 10:33-34)
condemned to death,
and handed over to the Gentiles who would mock him, flog him and kill him.
Suffering was his destiny too.

No Christian can doubt that the sufferings of Christ were for a reason.
But why should his people suffer also?

Paul says that his sufferings were
so that they would not rely on themselves but on God.
Such is our weakness
and such is the power of God,
that we need to learn that his strength is made known in our weakness.
He delivered the great apostle
and we can put our hope in him
that he will deliver us too if so be we are called to suffer in his name.

Some of course are called to die in the name of Christ,
but not many.
Most of us suffer some kind of hardship as we seek to serve him in our own locality
amongst those where God has placed us to bear his name.

And here Paul makes reference to their prayers.
Throughout the Bible we are encouraged to pray,
yet nowhere is prayer presented as a magic formula
to get you out of any fix you have got yourself into.

Yet God loves it when his people pray.
When we get down on our knees and share our problems and our needs,
our joys our sorrows
and our hardships with him.

And Paul attributes his own deliverance in no small measure
to the efficacy of their prayers.

Which brings us the question of comfort which Paul addresses in the early verses of
our portion.

Paul praises God as the 'Father of compassion and the God of all comfort'.
Even though we are called to suffer with Christ,
so the comforting love of a Father God overflows into our hearts.
And when it does so, it equips us to comfort those others who are suffering too.

So the comfort of God flows from him,
through us
to others.

This is the way the Holy Spirit works.
Indwelling each of us from the time we are reborn into Christ,
he works in us to produce fruits which are acceptable to God.

Through suffering,
hardships and experience,
together with the prayers of God's people
slowly but surely we are purified from within
as our consciences are tuned to God's ways
and our hearts and minds are purified from sin.

Throughout Scripture we find that suffering and affliction are used by God
to cause us to turn toward Him
to refine us
and make us holy.

And as we walk, or perhaps even crawl this often painful pathway,
our heavenly Father comes to us in compassion and comfort
as a father to his child.

In this way we learn how to comfort one another.

If we stand back from this letter we see a very sad and distressed apostle

seeking to win back his beloved converts from the clutches of the ‘super-apostles’ who had infiltrated the church at Corinth
and discredited Paul as being weak and non-triumphant.
They were preaching and teaching that ‘*real*’ apostles were strong,
blessed by God with wealth and prosperity
and should be paid for their services.

Paul was clearly none of these things.
Understandably there were many in the Church who were deeply distressed by the presence of these men
and it is to these that his words of comfort are addressed.

There is here a message for pastors and church leaders.
Few of us can be unaware that those who seek to lead God’s people,
suffer in themselves great anxiety,
not only from their own perceived inadequacy for the task,
but also from criticism and false accusation,
misunderstanding,
disagreement and opposition,
frequently from within the fellowship of God’s people.

Yet even when they are most distressed,
they find that they are the ones who are called upon to provide solace
and comfort to others who are hurting at the same time.
I speak from personal and painful experience.

At such times, Paul’s words here touch the very nerve of what God can do.
God the Father, the great Comforter,
comforts those who need comforting the most
so that in spite of their own tribulation
they are empowered by a compassionate God to comfort others too.

This is where Paul is coming from in these opening verses of this emotive letter.
Weary,
embattled
and downhearted,
he is drawing on the strength of his God
to minister to those in Corinth who are downtrodden in the church.

He is telling them that suffering and hardship are not a product of weakness,
but an expected outcome of seeking to follow Christ in a hostile world;
and that the comfort and strength of God are available to all like them
who continue humbly to serve the Lord.

Just as Jesus was rejected by those he came to serve,
so we shall find a similar rejection
in a world that still does not understand why he came nor who he was.
This is what Jesus told us to expect.

Yet in all of this we can give thanks.

For we are buoyed up both by the prayers of our fellow Christians
and by the power of God working in our lives
and in our churches
to bring many to know Christ
and to inherit an eternal kingdom
far above and beyond the woes of this fallen world.

May we both as a church and as individuals
know that joy
as we continue to pray for one another
and for those whom God has called to lead us through difficult days.

May his Name be praised

Amen.

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