

The God of All Comfort

Date: 14 June 2020, 1st Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's online

Series: God's Power in Our Weakness

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

In 1971 Helen Reddy released her hit single "I am woman". The chorus went

If I have to I can do anything

I am strong

I am invincible

I am woman

With its catchy tune and empowering lyrics the song quickly became a feminist anthem. Sometimes we do that kind of self talk don't we. When we're facing a challenge we can meet our doubts by saying to ourselves, "You can do it. You're strong. You've got this." It's standard fare for the self help industry. But what happens when you find you can't do it? What happens when you fail? When you're overwhelmed with doubt and fear? When you're broken and can barely raise your head? When quite frankly what you're facing is far far more than you can handle?

Today we're starting a new series studying the apostle Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. A verse that sums up the letter is Jesus' words to Paul in 12.9: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*. Maybe that's one you could memorize. Like our culture today, the ancient Greek culture in which the church in Corinth found itself prized strength and wisdom. You had to present smart and that you had things together. Although Paul had planted the church in Corinth, people there were criticizing Paul for being a weak and unimpressive leader. This letter is Paul's response to their criticisms. He basically does a judo move, and owns his own weakness. But he does so because God works through weakness and suffering. This is a great comfort. A comfort you and I need, whether you're a Christian or not. Which brings us to 2 Corinthians 1.

We're going to look at these verses in 2 parts. The God of All Comfort - 3-7; and the God who raises the dead 8-11. Before we get to verse three, just note how Paul describes himself and the church as the letter opens. They might be criticizing Paul, but he gently reminds them of his authority as an apostle, commissioned by Jesus himself. But he also reminds the Corinthians of who they are - saints. This does not mean they were especially good or spiritual, like say Mother Theresa. Saint means holy, or set apart. It's simply a description of them as God's people. All who trust in Jesus are saints, because to be a Christian is to be called by God, made clean and holy through Jesus' death, and called to live a holy life.

3-7 - The God of all comfort

Have a read with me verses 3-7.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we

are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ^z And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

What an extraordinary opening to a letter. For Paul here praise starts with where God has met him - right in the pit. *The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles.* The idea of trouble or suffering occurs 7 times in these verses, and the word comfort 9 times. Trouble and suffering is so often where we find ourselves. What we need is comfort. The Greek work is *paraklesis*. It means to draw alongside, to encourage and to exhort. And that is what God does with us. He comes alongside us. He encourages us. He puts his arm around us. In Isaiah 66:13 God says

As a mother comforts her child,
so will I comfort you;

The picture here is of a crying baby. And the only thing that will calm her down is the milk of her mother's breast. Well that is how God is tender to you.

How? How does God comfort us? Did you notice in verse 5 Paul says that

just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows

There is a mysterious union and solidarity between Christ and his people. Paul knew from his own experience. When Paul met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Jesus said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?"¹ The church is Christ's body. When one part suffers, he suffers. Somehow in our suffering, we share in his suffering.

There is of course particular suffering for sake of Christ and for the gospel in a world that crucified Christ. Following Christ will mean suffering. Sometimes it will mean suffering for the sake of others, in order to serve them and bring them the gospel. This is what Paul is primarily referring to here. But Christ's solidarity with us as we suffer *all* the troubles of a fallen world is no less true. He suffered the pain of rejection, loneliness, and grief. He suffered injustice. His body was violated. His soul was crushed. If you trust in Jesus you are a member of his body and he is with you to comfort you in *all* the troubles you suffer.

Jesus uses that same word for the Holy Spirit in John 14. He is the *parakletos*, the Comforter. Jesus says he will be with you forever, and that he will live with you and be in you.² So the Father of compassion comforts us in the infinite embrace and the Son and the Spirit.

But that comfort we receive is not only for us. Paul says God comforts us in all our troubles, *so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we have received from God.* Like everything else that God gives us, we share what we've received. I have seen this at St George's. Some of you carry great wounds. But in these you have received great comfort from God. You have shared that comfort with others. And in that the Holy Spirit how powerfully embraced those in need with his comfort.

¹ Acts 9.4

² John 14.16-17

Our vision as St George's is to be the light on the hill. We long to see people drawn to the light of Christ, transformed by the light of Christ and sent out to shine the light of Christ. One of the ways we seek to draw people to the light of Christ is through our pastoral care. These verses are at the heart of our pastoral care strategy. Pastoral care is something for the whole body. We share with each other the comfort we receive from Christ. It's been a beautiful thing to see so many of you reaching out to care for each other during lockdown with phone calls.

8-11 - God who raises the dead

In verses 8-11 Paul illustrates what he has been saying with his own experience.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

I just wanted to briefly say 2 things here. You may have heard people say, "God won't give you more than you can handle." That's rubbish, at least according to St Paul. You may experience things far beyond your ability to endure. But listen to what Paul says - *this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ... on him we have set our hope*. When you are under great pressure, who or what do you rely on? Yourself? Alcohol? Your smart phone? Only God has the power to raise the dead. Second, notice the prayer and thanksgiving in verse 11. Your prayers really help those you pray for. And when God answers, thank him! Paul Barnett writes,

Modern man is so blinded by his technology and his own sense of power that he regards prayer and thanksgiving as weak, useless and a joke. The reality, however, is that everybody is at the mercy of social, political and economic forces. The apprehension that human omnipotence is in fact an illusion is a precondition to the discovery ... of the power of God and of prayer and thanksgiving. Paul's helplessness in the face of strong forces led him to experience, doubtless through prayer, the power of God to deliver him.³

May each one of us find comfort strength in the God who raises the dead.

³ Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, IVP 1988: 35