

## The Comforter

Date: 19 May 2024, Pentecost

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Holy Spirit

Texts: John 14:15-27, Isaiah 49:13-16, 66:10-13

Last year as many of you know we went to the UK on long service leave. One day while we were in London, we went to the Victoria and Albert Museum. At one point I left the rest of the family to return the activity packs the kids had borrowed when I got a call from Claire. She and the kids were in a lift. Beatrix had put her hand on the glass door, and when it opened it pulled her hand with it into the cavity. Claire had had to pull her hand out. There was blood everywhere. We met at the entrance to the museum. The staff had called their first aid officer. Beatrix was inconsolable. I just held her while the first aid guy cleaned up and bandaged her hand and gave her an ice pack. In the end she was ok. She had just lost a layer of skin on a finger and has the scar to prove it. But it was obviously traumatic for her. Since then we've realised that she's pretty sensitive to getting hurt. When you're a 2 year old and something like this happens, what you need is your mum or your dad just to hold you and comfort you.

As we grow up we can become more resilient, but things happen that wound us. We're pierced by many griefs and we sometimes just want someone to hold us and comfort us. It's a perfectly human response to trauma. We want to know that we're not alone, that there's someone with us who loves us and cares for us. There's a little child in all of us that wants to be held.

Today is the day of Pentecost. We read in the book of Acts that 50 days after Jesus' resurrection he poured out the promised gift of the Father on the early church, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, along with the Father and the Son. He's the presence and power of God at work in the world and at work in our lives. Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." If you lived in Palestine 2000 years ago you could have met Jesus and had a personal encounter with God in the flesh. But Jesus is now in heaven, reigning at the Father's right hand. So how can we experience God today? Through the Holy Spirit.

Each Pentecost I do a sermon looking at a different aspect of the Holy Spirit. It's a long and infrequent sermon series! Since Easter we've been working our way through 2 Samuel, and we've touched on some pretty heavy stuff: - grief at the death of friends, at the death of child;

murder, adultery. In 1 Samuel there was infertility and witchcraft amongst other things. Next week is a pretty dark text as well, with rape, incest and murder. The text offers something of a mirror to some of the things that can wound us. So in preparing for today I was asking God for what I could bring about the Holy Spirit that would bring us some light and joy. The answer I was led to comes from our reading in John. Here Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. Jesus says,

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever - the Spirit of Truth.

That word translated as “Advocate” is *Parakletos*. It literally means “Helper”, or “one who comes alongside”. Another translation is “Comforter”. An Advocate speaks on our behalf and for us. And the Holy Spirit does this when we pray. In Romans it says that he intercedes with the Father for us.<sup>1</sup> A Comforter is someone who speaks to us. Isaiah 40 begins with these words, famously set to music by Handel in the Messiah. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem”. That is what the Holy Spirit does. He is God comforting us and speaking tenderly to us. So today I wanted to look at the Holy Spirit as our Comforter. First we’ll have a look at what Jesus says about the Spirit in John 14 and then we’ll look at some pictures of God as Comforter in the Old Testament.

Let’s turn to John 14. Jesus says in verse 16:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth.

The Comforter is given to help us and to be with us forever. It’s the last supper. Jesus is speaking with his disciples. He is about to die. And even though he will rise he will leave them when he returns to heaven. He is speaking to comfort them in anticipation of their grief at his departure. In verse 18 Jesus says, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” How is it that Jesus will come to his disciples? The answer is by the person of the Holy Spirit. He is elsewhere called the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. Just as Jesus is God come in the flesh, so the Holy Spirit is his personal presence, the personal presence of God himself. And Jesus explains how this works, verse 20, “On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” This is, granted, difficult for us to wrap our heads around. Theologians use words like the “mutual interpenetration” of the persons of the Godhead. But the point is, where Jesus is, there is God the Father. And where the Spirit is, so there is also the Son and the Father. But the extraordinary thing is that he is not just out there, but Jesus says, he is also in us.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:26

In verse 23 Jesus uses the picture of a home to make the same point. He says, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” When we accept Jesus, we open the door of our hearts to him, he and his Father come to live in us, they make their home with us, and they are personally present by the Holy Spirit. It’s upon this basis that Paul can say in 1 Corinthians that both the church is the temple of God, because the Holy Spirit dwells in the church, and also our bodies are temples, because the Holy Spirit lives in each of us as believers.<sup>2</sup> Which, by the way, is why it matters a great deal what we do with both our bodies and the church. Or, as Jesus puts it here, “If you love me, keep my commands.”<sup>3</sup>

And I love what Jesus says, back in verse 18 - the Holy Spirit will be with us *forever*. Once he has come in and made his home with us, he doesn’t up and leave. He stays with us. That’s why we’re not orphans - because God the Father and Jesus our brother are with us by the Holy Spirit. This is how we experience God in our lives - by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says the Spirit will do two things. First, he will teach us. We no longer have Jesus speaking God’s word to us. But Jesus says, verse 26, “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” And then second he says, verse 27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” The way we experience the peace of God Christ is by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.

So the Holy Spirit is the personal presence of Jesus with all who believe. In the person of the Spirit, the Father and Son have made their home in us. Jesus named the Holy Spirit the Comforter. How does he comfort us? Psalm 119.76 says, “May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant.” It is by the promises of God that we know his love and so find his comfort. Jesus said the Holy Spirit will remind us of everything he has said. So the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s promises and writes them on our hearts. It’s as we meditate on the promises of God that we find the Holy Spirit comforts us. We can feel him holding us and enfolding us in his loving embrace.

We can so often turn to other things for comfort when we’re hurting - alcohol, food, sex, drugs, computer games, doom scrolling on your phone. But the invitation of the Holy Spirit is that we come to him and hear his tender words of comfort. So for the remainder of this

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 3.16-17, 6.19

<sup>3</sup> John 14.15, cf. 21, 23-24

sermon I want to meditate with you on the promises of Comfort in the prophet Isaiah. The words were spoken to God's ancient people. They were in a period of despair and intense suffering. They were wounded by their own sin. They were suffering at the hands of oppressors. They felt alienated and abandoned by God. As God spoke to them by the Holy Spirit through Isaiah, so he also speaks to his tender words of comfort to us. So just take a moment to be still. Take a deep breath. Open yourself to the Holy Spirit. He is here with us. Breathe out. Release the chaos and noise in your mind to him. Breathe in. Breathe out.

In chapter 49 we read,

- 13** Shout for joy, you heavens;  
 rejoice, you earth;  
 burst into song, you mountains!  
 For the LORD comforts his people  
 and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.
- 14** But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me,  
 the Lord has forgotten me.'
- 15** 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast  
 and have no compassion on the child she has borne?  
 Though she may forget,  
 I will not forget you!
- 16** See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;  
 your walls are ever before me.

For me these are some of the most precious words of Scripture. How could a mother forget the baby at her breast? It is unimaginable. And yet God says, even if she forgets, he will not forget us. And did you see the extraordinary picture he uses? "See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." These words were written hundreds of years before Jesus, and yet when we look to the cross we see the full meaning of these words. With the nails our names are engraved on God's own hands! You may be afflicted, facing such suffering that you feel utterly forsaken, but here we see the truth written in blood. God does not, cannot forget us. The Holy Spirit holds you close. He is there to comfort you.

In chapter 51 Isaiah writes,

- The LORD will surely comfort Zion  
 and will look with compassion on all her ruins;  
 he will make her deserts like Eden,  
 her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.

Joy and gladness will be found in her,  
 thanksgiving and the sound of singing.<sup>4</sup>

Are you in a situation where your life is in ruins? Plans have fallen apart. What you have built has been destroyed. Your joy has been stripped from you. You are in a dry and barren wasteland. How can your desert be like Eden? Because Eden was the place where God walked with his people. And he has poured out upon you his Holy Spirit, his personal presence to walk with you such that even in the wasteland he is there and so water may pour forth. The Spirit has come to bring you joy and gladness such that you well up to God with thanksgiving and songs of praise.

The novelist Francis Spufford calls sin the human propensity to stuff things up, although he uses more colourful language. Maybe that's what you've done. You're crushed by self-inflicted wounds. You mourn and grieve because you've broken things. Your heart is restless, churning, tossed back and forth. Hear these words of comfort from the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 57.

I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;  
 I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners,  
 creating praise on their lips.  
 Peace, peace, to those far and near,  
 'And I will heal them.' says the LORD.<sup>5</sup>

Receive his peace. Let him gently heal your heart.

Jesus began his ministry by reading these next words from Isaiah. His Spirit is here right now to do this for you.

'The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
 because the LORD has anointed me  
 to proclaim good news to the poor.  
 He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,  
 to proclaim freedom for the captives  
 and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
**2** to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour  
 and the day of vengeance of our God,  
 to comfort all who mourn,  
**3** and provide for those who grieve in Zion –  
 to bestow on them a crown of beauty

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 51.3

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 51.18-19

instead of ashes,  
 the oil of joy  
 instead of mourning,  
 and a garment of praise  
 instead of a spirit of despair.  
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
 a planting of the LORD  
 for the display of his splendour.<sup>6</sup>

In his final chapter Isaiah returns to that picture of a mother comforting a baby at her breast. We are God's children. We're weak, helpless, we don't understand what happens, even what we've done. He is there with arms open wide to hold us close. Hear his words to you and let the Holy Spirit enfold you in his arms.

**10** 'Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her,  
 all you who love her;  
 rejoice greatly with her,  
 all you who mourn over her.  
**11** For you will feed and be satisfied  
 at her comforting breasts;  
 you will drink deeply  
 and delight in her overflowing abundance.'  
**12** For this is what the LORD says:  
 'I will extend peace to her like a river,  
 and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream;  
 you will feed and be carried on her arm  
 and dandled on her knees.  
**13** As a mother comforts her child,  
 so will I comfort you;  
 and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.'<sup>7</sup>

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."  
 He has given us the Holy Spirit to be our Comforter, to help us and be with us forever. In our mourning let us turn to him for comfort. As we receive the milk of his comfort, let us praise his holy name.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 61.1-3

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 66:10-13