

GOD OF ALL COMFORT



INTRODUCTION

Today is Mothers' Day in the UK. Mothers' Day is celebrated in more than 50 countries across the world with the majority celebrating it on the second Sunday of May. Although Mothers' Day is a relatively new celebration, there are records that show that the early church held a festival on the 4th Sunday of Lent to honour Mary the mother of Jesus. In our liturgical calendar, today is indeed the 4th Sunday of Lent.

In the United Kingdom, the 4th Sunday of Lent is known as Mothering Sunday. But it should not be confused with Mothers' Day, which just so happens to be celebrated on the same day. The celebration of Mother's Day gained momentum just more than a century ago. In 1908, Anna Jervis wanted to honour her mother, who was a vocal peace activist during the US Civil War. It took a long time to convince authorities, but her tenacity paid off and in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson declared Mothers' Day as an official celebration day.

Unfortunately, the day became something that Anna never intended. Mothers' Day soon became commercialised. Anna condemned the commercialisation and started organising boycotts of the day she created. She was even arrested for disturbing the peace. Anna is recorded for saying: "*A printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world.*" She was also against buying chocolates as a gift. She said: "*You take a box to your mother and then eat most of it yourself. What a "pretty" sentiment!*".

Mothering Sunday on the other hand was celebrated as an explicit religious event in England from the 16th century. The reference to "mothering" was to the "mother church", being the cathedral or main church in a region. On the 4th Sunday of Lent, Christians would return to their mother church for a special service. In those days, many were domestic servants and labourers (often still children). Their employers would then give them the day off to visit their own families and to worship at their mother church. The pilgrimage home was called "going a-mothering" and was a time of true comforting for families. The day would be celebrated with comforting home cooked food to make up for the general austerity and fasting during Lent. One of the traditions was to bake a rich fruit cake known as Simnel cake. Sadly, the celebration of

Mothering Sunday lost its meaning a century ago with the rise of the secular celebration of Mothers' Day.

In today's lesson, we will build one of the themes of Mothering Sunday – the theme of being comforted.

WHERE DO WE TURN IN OUR AFFLICITION?

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul dealt with the paradox of affliction and comfort. Through our support of the Barnabas Fund, we are aware of the affliction endured by so many Christians. The current war in Ukraine brings the devastating reality of affliction right into our homes via television news and social media. Soon, we may meet Ukrainian refugees in the Isle of Man under the government's open house scheme.

But affliction is much broader and closer to each one of us. The Greek word used by Paul is "thipsis". If used in a medical context, it means a compression or constriction by an outside cause, especially of the blood vessels or another part of the body. In the Biblical context it means a pressing, pressing together, pressure or a burden.

Are you experiencing any form of pressure or burden? Our pressures could be physical in the form of illness, poor health, and pain. It could be pressure in our relationships with family and friends, or financial and work related pressure. It may be stress, anxiety, depression, or uncertainty of what the future holds, all contributing to mental health pressure. Or it may be spiritual burdens and pressure such as spiritual attacks or doubting one's faith and salvation or unrepented sin. It will be remarkable if anyone said that they experienced no pressure or burdens whatsoever. I had an elderly minister friend who once said: "*The morning when I wake up and feel no pain and have no problems, I will know that I have passed away and woke up in heaven.*"

The question then is, where do you go with all our pressure and burdens? More importantly, who do we go to for help and assistance? Some of us may see it as weakness to ask for help and then just keep it to ourselves. Men tend to fall into this trap. The younger digital generation is exposed to social media and its false gospel of idealistic evergreen happiness. Many do not want to appear to be unhappy and don't want to be seen to ask for help. The irony is that social media is often achieving the opposite of making people "unsocial", isolated, and lonely.

Usually, we would turn to our friends and family first. Children and young adults will turn to their mother and/or father for help and guidance. We are fortunate to have the government and the third sector (various charities including churches) providing a full range of support services. In the formal sector, many employers now have employee wellbeing programs with access to specialist counselors for their staff and their families.

The help that is around us is all good, but as Christians we have a much more powerful Person to approach – God the Father. This became so real to our family when Yolande had a horrific horse riding accident in 2011. The trauma doctor immediately called for an orthopedic surgeon, who confirmed that she had extensive damage to her hip and femur bone. We could not understand

why many hours passed before Yolande was taken into theatre. Later, the surgeon told us that after seeing the X-rays, he did not know how to approach the complex operation. So, he had to first go home and pray to the Lord for help. And by God's grace and with his help, the surgeon performed a miraculous and successful emergency operation.

I AM HE WHO COMFORTS

Paul experienced affliction first-hand. But he also experienced supernatural comfort at the very same time. How is this possible? Or rather, who makes it possible to experience comfort amidst of pressure and burdens. Paul clearly points to: "...***The God and Father of all our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies and God of all comfort.***" 2 Cor 1:3. Yes, the Father is indeed the One we must turn to with our pressures and burdens.

Jesus modelled this for us many times during His ministry on earth. In our reading from Luke 22, Jesus showed us again to turn to the Father when we are under pressure. Shortly before His betrayal and arrest, Jesus experienced extreme pressure knowing what was to come. Luke described how Jesus was in agony to the point of severity where his sweat became like great drops of blood. What did Jesus do? He went on his knees and prayed to the Father.

When we are under pressure, it is certainly not wrong to turn to others for help. But we must also turn to God the Father. King David advised: "***Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.***" Ps 146:3. There is also a real danger of turning away from God when things go wrong. The Evil One often misleads by planting the thought that is God's fault that one is experiencing pressure and burdens. He could pester with thoughts like: "*How can I turn to a God that is allowing the pressure?*". John saw the worst of this in the vision of the plagues that will afflict people on earth. Their response was: "***they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give Him glory.***" Rev 16:9

The topic of why we experience pressure and burdens is a sermon all on its own. The core message today is when these things happen, we can choose to either turn to the Father or turn away from Him. Listen to what God said in Isaiah 51: "***I, I am He who comforts you...***" vs 12. Why would we not turn to Him? Why would we rather listen to someone else or rather blame God than being comforted by Him?

Part of the problem is that we forget who God is and what He has done and is doing. We forget that He is the only true Sovereign God, the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, He who was, and is and will always be, the alpha and the omega. It is so important that we have reverence and respect for the Almighty God. He could wipe us out in an instant yet shows us mercy, love and grace.

It is part of our human nature to place ourselves on our own throne and to think the world revolves around ourselves. In Isaiah 51, the Lord talked directly to remind who He really is: "***...your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth...I am the Lord your God who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord of hosts...***". The Lord then

challenged his people to ask why they fear, given all the great works and protection that He has afforded over them in the past. And He reminded them that they are His children: "*And I have put my words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of my hand...saying to Zion: "you are my people"*".

I would like to invite you today to always go to the Father for comfort during difficult times. We have a wonderful assurance from James: "*Draw new to God and He will draw near to you.*" James 4:8 and from Jeremiah: "*You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart.*" Jer 29:13.

HOW DOES THE FATHER COMFORT US?

What image or memory comes to your mind when you hear the word "comforted"? Many of us may have vivid memories of sitting on the lap of our mother or father or grandparent and being hugged and comforted with the words: "*don't worry, it is all going to be ok.*" How does God comfort us?

The Greek word used by Paul is "*parakaleo*" and means to call near or alongside. Our English word comes from the Latin "*confortare*" and means to strengthen. When we put all this together, we have a wonderful image of the Father to say that He will be alongside us and near us to strengthen us when we are experiencing pressure and burdens. This Fatherly comfort is much more than just a hug and consoling words. The Father comforts and strengthens us in various ways:

- **The Holy Spirit:** We have the promise and the presence of the Holy Spirit that lives and works within us. "*I will ask the Father and He will give you another Helper to be with you forever.*" John 14:16. The Helper is aptly also known as the Comforter.
- **Scripture:** The Father comforts, reassures and feeds us through His written Word brought to life by the Holy Spirit. The Psalms are particularly comforting during times of affliction.
- **Nature:** The Father reveals his power and love through the works of His hands. Amongst many things in nature, pets are a special gift from God. They are often a comfort to us and we must thank the Lord for the blessings and comfort they bring to us.
- **The Church:** The Lord uses other people to comfort and help us in time of need. That is precisely why it is important to be actively part of the Church, the body of Christ on earth. For this reason, our declaration of faith includes: "*I believe...in the communion of the saints*".

THE CALL TO COMFORT OTHERS

Paul went one step further: the call to be comforted by the Father is extended to actively go and comfort others. The Father's comforting of us is not meant to leave us just with a warm feeling. It is also meant to kick-start us into action to be there for others who are experiencing pressure and burdens: "*...the Father who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*" 2 Cor 1:4.

We have experienced first-hand in St Barnabas's weekly fellowship how we have all been strengthened and encouraged by the many testimonies of our fellow brothers and sisters. Hearing about the pressures and burdens of others and how they have prevailed through God's love, grace and power, certainly strengthens (i.e. comforts) us. It should be no surprise now given what Paul said: "*...if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.*" 2 Cor 1:8.

Our comforting of each other does not substitute the Father's comfort but rather complements it in a tangible manner. Many years ago, a friend's young son was very scared during a thunderstorm. She comforted him by saying: "*the Lord is with you and will protect you*" to which he replied: "*I know but tonight I need someone with a skin on to be with me.*"

GLORIFYING GOD IN AFFLICTION

It is so important to learn from the Word of God. We read in Revelation about people who will curse God, be unrepentant and deny God when they are in affliction. The opposite must be true of us when we experience pressure and burdens. We must repent, thank the Lord, bless Him and glorify His name.

We must learn from the prophet Habakkuk's prayer at a time of great affliction. He concluded with: "*though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and the be no herd in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like the deer's; He makes me tread on high places.*" Hab 3:17 – 19.

We should also learn from King David who experienced many afflictions. Psalm 142 – 145 is a valuable collection that start with David hiding in a cave fearing for his life. He called to the Lord, calling to memory all the good that God has done in the past and acknowledged the sovereignty of God. He then made a commitment: "*Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name!*". Psalm 142:7. When David was finally freed from the affliction, he stayed true to his promise and we read in Psalm 145 how he sang to the greatness of the Lord: "*I will extol You, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Everyday I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised and His greatness is unsearchable*".

AMEN

Collect (Prayer before the readings): *God of compassion, comfort and strengthen us in our daily living that in joy and in sorrow we may know the power of Your presence to bind us together and to heal; through Jesus Christ Your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen*

Readings: Old Testament: Isaiah 51:1 - 16
New Testament: 2 Corinthians 1:1 - 11
Gospel: Luke 22:39 - 46

Hymns:

1. 453 (Common Praise): Great is Thy faithfulness
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTKlqmdfHSk>
2. 386 (Common Praise): Be Thou my vision
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AdBkJurR4>
3. 1008 (Mission Praise): The Lord is my Shepherd
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4tPkX0MG0>
4. 393 (Common Praise): Brother, Sister let me serve you
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttW9oQ-yiuU>