

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 5 July 2020 11.00am

Richard Shepley

“The Comfortable Words”

Preached on 5 July 2020 t 11.0am by Richard Shepley

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Romans 7:15-25a

Many of you will remember Carolyn Birabem who worshipped here at Hinde Street for many years. When Carolyn was in Trinity Hospice at the end of her life, we were finishing the alterations to the church entrance, and we asked the congregation to suggest words from the Bible that we could put on the glass screen that separates the entrance foyer from the church itself. From the various suggestions we had, it was Carolyn’s that we chose. It’s there now.

*‘Come to me, all who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.’*

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We are living in a time of fear and wonder that has snuck up on us without warning. And it is a very strange time.

Those of you who do go out walking in the streets will see people of all ages steering well clear of others and wearing face masks at all times; whereas others - also of all ages - seem more cavalier in their approach. No masks, not much attention to social distancing.

Each one of us has their own way of dealing with it.

But there is real fear in many of our minds. And it runs deep.

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Does the phrase ‘The Comfortable Words’ mean anything to you? If like me you are a cradle Anglican and over 65, you will probably remember the Communion Service in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

In my childhood and youth, every Sunday, immediately before the confession, our vicar would say;

*Hear what Comfortable Words our Saviour Christ says  
to all who truly turn to him:*

*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest.*

*God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son,  
that whoever believes in him should not perish  
but have eternal life.*

*And so on*

And they ARE comfortable words. Even as a child I loved that phrase. Whenever we are in distress, to hear those words reminds us that our God is Love.

I have sometimes been told by non-believers, “*Your faith is just an emotional crutch which I don’t need.*” To which my answer is to say, well I do need it, and then perhaps to quote Jesus, “*Only those who know they are sick go to the doctor.*”

Jesus has good credentials when it comes to the things of God, and I am happy to know that he offers me refreshment NOW.

As we live through this perfect storm of fear and an unknown future at a global and individual level, the comfortable words are just that. A comfort to know that God – the Creator God of Love - cares about us.

Reginald Somerset Ward – an Anglican priest, Spiritual Director and pacifist in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century said this;

*So often we fall into the mistake of thinking that God’s love is confined to the great things. We forget that God is infinite in his littleness as well as in his greatness*

In other words, what we may feel are our petty fears and anxieties are not petty to God.

*‘Come to me, and you will find rest for your souls.*

Wonderful. Because sometimes – like now - rest for our souls is what we need more than anything else in the world.

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How can we sum up our faith in a nutshell?

Have you heard the one about two first-century rabbis, Hillel and Shammai? Hillel was a tolerant and liberal interpreter of the Torah, that is the Law. Shammai was more, let's say, demanding and inflexible.

One day, a gentile came up to them and, obviously trying to rile them, asked, "Can you teach me the whole Torah while standing on one leg, please?"

Shammai apparently lost his temper, and just smacked the guy over the head with his walking stick.

Hillel paused, then got up from his seat, stood on one leg and said,

**"That which is hateful to you, do not unto another: This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary —go now and study."**

How would you sum up your faith?

I wondered about putting a giant banner up outside the church saying simply

**God's love for you is infinite, compassionate and unconditional.**

**For more information enquire within.**

That's it. A bit too basic you think?

Well I would argue that this is the basic-est truth of all.

But, as Hillel said, "The rest is commentary – NOW GO STUDY!"

Jesus in our verses says this

*'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. **Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.**'*

The idea is that, just like two oxen, we can be yoked side by side with Jesus, and in so being, we live, walk and work with him at our side.

One commentator puts it like this

*Jesus wants those who are burdened to learn from him; and His guidance is not harsh or arrogant, and therefore obedience to the word should be easy.*

Once we really 'get' the idea that God's love is so total, we need to find out more. Hence Hillel's "Now go study", and my imagined poster, "Enquire within". Find out more. It'll amaze you.

I find the last sentence in the quote above a bit difficult,

‘ . . . *obedience to the word should be easy.*’

Difficult because, well, obedience to the word is NOT easy – not for me anyway. I don’t know about you.

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Which brings us to Romans 7:15-25a

Let’s just pick out a few verses;

<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

<sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.

Paul is in a bad way here – finding himself torn apart by conflicting desires.

Or is he? Believe it or not, theologians have spent almost two millennia arguing about what Paul means in this passage by the word “I”.

For the first three hundred years of the Christian era, teachers in the Church had seen this passage as Paul talking about his life before he became a Christian.

One of their arguments in favour of this was that in his other letters he was hardly a shrinking violet in saying how good he was. For instance, this from Philippians, ‘*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen **in me**, and the God of peace will be with you.*’ Modest or what?

But St Augustine (who, let’s face it knew a lot about sin) said no. This was Paul in the here and NOW; this is a picture of any Christian and his/her daily struggles with sin.

The argument still goes on today.

I side with St Augustine. Not because I am a great theologian. No, for no better reason than this. If Paul IS talking about his life before he became a Christian, it means that now he IS a Christian, he no longer experiences this inner fight, and all is sweetness and light.

If that’s what he means, then I am **stuffed**.

Because Paul in this passage is describing my life **now**.

And I hope you'll say he is describing you too, because if not, I am certainly not fit to be a Methodist – or even an Anglican.

I sin. NOW.

I do what I don't want to do.

I frequently find that comfortable selfishness is just, well, too attractive, and a much easier option than altruism/ generosity/ charity/ benevolence/ magnanimity/ philanthropy/ self-sacrifice/ compassion/ self-denial/ public-spiritedness/ kindness/ lavishness/ liberality or bounteousness.

Don't you?

I am sure that St Paul did too, and he cries out for help, which comes in verse 25.

*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? I thank God that **I have been rescued through Jesus Christ our Lord.***

Jesus will deliver me from past failures and help me to do the right thing now. But what about the future?

We are promised the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God, and we can testify to that divine help.

But alongside that we can help ourselves as well.

This is St Paul in Philippians 4: 8

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is any excellence and anything worthy of praise, **think on these things** (jumping a verse here) and the God of peace will be with you.*

But it is not just about thinking, or resting!

Listen to the verse I jumped over. It's the one I quoted earlier about Paul's seeming lack of modesty.

***Keep on doing** the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Rest in God, dwell on that which is of God, and work with God.

I don't know if you have noticed, but this sermon has been very "me, me, me" orientated, hasn't it? In the 11 verses of our passage, Paul uses the word "I" an amazing 24 times. When we are in a mess, we tend to think most about ourselves.

But there is another help that God has made available to us to stop us from doing that which we would not do; and that is each other.

I spoke 3 weeks ago about how *“liberation from behaviours, patterns, or structures is available to us; freedom from powers that constrain us and prevent us from living full human lives.”*

As I said, Alcoholics Anonymous and the other 12 step groups that meet at Hinde Street are living proof that this liberation is indeed possible. And it works through the group meetings themselves. It’s almost a mantra in AA, ‘Don’t drink, do go to meetings’.

And this is our experience too, we have each other to support us in our worship, in our small groups, our classes.

You will probably have heard the analogy that if you take a burning log out of a fire, it will usually fade to an ember, and eventually go out. We are strengthened in our faith by being together.

And this is another hardship that we are suffering during the present pandemic – our inability to really, physically meet.

Thank God for Zoom, many of us can say. But not all. So do remember to keep in touch with those who do not use Zoom.

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Paul ends his words about his failures calling himself “Wretched”.

The Greek word he used for ‘wretched’ is more literally translated as, “wretched through the exhaustion of hard labour.” Dog tired. Weary.

Which takes us back to the Comfortable Words, ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will refresh you.’

So, we have come full circle, and I can stop. Amen