

## *Our God of All Comfort*

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### *2 Corinthians 1:1-7*

Last Saturday (June 11), Queen Elizabeth celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her mother, the Queen Mother, lived to be 101. She died in 2003. Her husband, the Duke of York, unexpectedly became king in 1936 when his brother, Edward VIII, abdicated in order to marry his American love, Wallis Simpson. During the War, she and her husband, King George VI, remained in London in spite of the real danger that involved. Because of her indomitable spirit--which gave moral support to the British public--Adolf Hitler called her "*the most dangerous woman in Europe*" -- (Richard Langworth, *HM Queen Mother, 1900-2003*, 2010). The part of London that suffered most from German bombing was the east end, and she and the king made many visits there to visit those affected. Then, the monarchs' own home, Buckingham Palace, was hit by a bomb that caused considerable damage. "*At last,*" she said, "*I can now look the East End in the face.*" What she meant was, now she'd suffered something of what they had suffered, and the comfort she could bring them by her presence was more stronger and meaningful.

As we begin our look at this second letter of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, the first theme he addresses--interestingly--is the theme of comfort. In fact, in vss. 3-7, the word comfort appears ten times! What Paul is speaking about here is the strange, majestic comfort that comes to Jesus' own followers as a result of Jesus' own suffering and sorrow, and death. What we have in this opening passage is a kind of lens through which Paul determines to see and know all suffering, all the troubles of this world, his own included. Suffering and comfort become a way to see and experience the gospel.

The gospel as he summarized in First Corinthians 15:3-8 is about Jesus Christ, the

rightful King of this world: that he “*died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures.*” It matters vitally to Paul that these events really took place. But it matters just as much that they become the lens through which the whole world--and our lives--be seen in focus, the grid on which all reality and our experience be understood. Indeed, as he begins in vs. 3, “*Let us bless God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...*” his words here become a prayer of thanksgiving. Suffering and comfort, then, are to be seen as very much a major concern, in fact a key aspect--a vital aspect--for living the Christian life.

This ten-times used word--translated “comfort” or “console/consolation”--is a powerful word. It carries with it the idea of calling on someone to come near to help--the idea that one person is being with another, speaking words which change their mood, give them courage, new hope, new direction, new insights, which will alter the way they face the next moment, the next day, maybe the rest of their life. The reason Paul can say this, believe this, is this: At the heart of what Paul is getting at here is this profound reality: What is true of Jesus Christ--both in suffering and in character--becomes true of his people. This is a central concept for Paul, as we shall see further into the letter.

But it’s not just a powerful idea, it is a fact of experience. It has to do with living, as he puts it, “*in Christ.*” “*In Christ*” is a very important little phrase Paul uses over 160 times in his letters. As Paul uses this idea of our “comfort in Christ, “he is speaking to our relationship and life in Jesus. There’s a kind of interchange between him and us--Jesus Christ died, so his people die in him, sharing his sufferings; Jesus Christ rose again, so his people rise again in him, knowing the power of his resurrection

to comfort and heal, both now in the present time, and in that Day when they will be given new, resurrection bodies like Jesus now has, and when all sin, sorrow, and pain are forever banished from our world. This is why--when you read Paul's letters closely--the Christian hope is always expressed, not in terms of "going to heaven," but being "raised with Christ."

As well, what is key, what is so important, is that in this interchange and inter-twining of our lives with his, not only is the comfort and love of God known, but God himself is at work in and through the strange and troubling things that happen to us all. The Lordship, gospel, and ministry of Jesus is what is really happening in the world--what is really important to God. That's the agenda of what God is doing by his people in the world. Grasping this truth gives a new vision for one's life, a vision shaped by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus on earth, and the living, reigning Jesus now from heaven. That vision is filled with both love and light, enabling one to see and experience God's grace in the midst of tragedy, and a love strong enough to know that one is held in the divine embrace which is both a comfort in the present and victorious into the future.

Consider three things from these opening words of Paul. One, Christ's sufferings carry over to us; as he puts it, "we have an overflowing share of Christ's sufferings," (vs. 5). As I said, there is a kind of solidarity that exists between Christ and ourselves. We hear it in the Beatitudes, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake ...Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account,*" (Mt 5:10-11). Further, Jesus taught that he and his followers were one in ministry--both received and withheld. Referring to what those

who claimed to be his followers will have done or not in the final judgment, he said, “*What-ever you did--or did not do--for one of the least of these, you did--or did not do it--for me,*” (Mt 7:25:45). The apostle Peter wrote to the Christians in Asia Minor, “*Rejoice ... as you participate in the sufferings of Christ,*” (1 Pet 4:13)--that is, as you follow and identify with the ministry of Christ to others and what that entails.

So what does it entail? The major characteristic of the coming of Christ’s kingdom into this world--in which we participate--is a time marked by sufferings, first Christ’s and then ours. We find our identification--that is, our very lives and salvation--with Christ in his sufferings. Listen to Paul: “*When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!,’*” he writes to the Romans, “*it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ [of the kingdom]--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him,*” (Rom 8:15-17). Likewise to the Philippians, he says, “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,*” (Phil 3:10). Now Paul will go into this further later in the letter, but it should be clear here that there is a connection between Christ’s sufferings and ours now, especially as we identify with the sufferings and needs of others. Christ’s life was a life for the sake of others. So are ours, if we follow him.

The second thing to notice here is how Paul speaks of God as “*the father of mercies and the God of all comfort,*” (vs.3). God is both a compassionate Father and the very source of all compassion. Paul may be using the image of Isaiah’s words: “*As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you,*” (66:13). Yet, we must not hear these as mere statements. We are meant to know them, and be assured of them, and we are

because of Christ Jesus. He is the One through whom these things are known and experienced. It is through Christ “in us” that our comfort overflows. We not only have an “*overflowing share in his sufferings,*” with him, “*we have an overflowing share of com-fort,*” (vs. 5). Again, this is what is really going on in the world that matters, the agenda that really counts, because this is the kingdom reality which we share with Jesus our Lord--his sufferings and the sufferings of others, and the grace that is his comfort and sharing that comfort with others. God is the source of it all, poured into us in Jesus Christ.

And the third thing then flows right out of the second. On the one hand, both troubles and comfort come to us through Christ. And on the other, “*we can comfort people in every kind of trouble, through the comfort with which God comforts us,*” (vs.4). The comfort we receive from God through Christ, we are both to give to and receive from one another. God’s comfort, therefore, does not terminate on the one who receives it. It keeps going. God comforts us, we comfort others, others comfort more still, and on and on it is meant to go. It is not exaggeration to speak of our ministry as that of comfort.

Another thing here is also clear. The ministry of comfort is shared--to be shared--by all. It is meant to be characteristic of the whole Body of Christ and all its members. As we will see further down the letter, the characteristic of Christian living that Paul emphasizes is the power of God that meet us in our weaknesses. The mercies of God come to us especially in our points of need. In our time, many ministers--sadly missing Paul’s point, and Jesus’, too--raise the hope of people by promising health and prosperity as their due portion from God. The apostle Paul, by contrast, soberly calls attention to his readers’ sufferings, and he promises--not immediate healing and

success--but God's comfort experienced in faithfulness to Jesus. Vs. 6: *"If we are troubled, it's for the sake of your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it's because of your comfort, which comes about as you bear patiently with the same sufferings that we are going through."*

You might be thinking: Well, then, are we are to go out and look for trouble? What if I am not suffering right now? What does this mean for me? One need not look for trouble to encounter it. As Jesus said, *"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today,"* (Mt 6:34). But like Jesus, who encountered people every day, he encountered people troubled, in trouble, and troubled by others. So do we, if we're paying any attention to those around us, who God may place in our path. And that's what we are called to do.

Naturally, we are meant first to be concerned with those immediately around us--be that family, loved ones, and our church family. But there are others, of course, we encounter directly or indirectly, that cross our paths, and one wonders for what purpose, to what end. But in all cases, what should be our countenance, our approach, our disposition toward others? Comfort--as needed--and grace, and hope to all, in whatever situation they may be, but particularly if troubled. To repeat Paul, *"we can comfort people in every kind of trouble, through the comfort with which God comforts us,"* (vs.4). As Paul makes clear in these opening words, to follow Christ is to enter into--to identify with--his sufferings and those of others as he did. This is part of discipleship. Jesus says so in words such as *"Remember the word that I said unto you, A servant is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you,"* (Jn 15:20). And Paul had to learn what those words of the Lord Jesus meant he heard at

his conversion, when Jesus said of him, *“I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name,”* (Acts 9:16). But again, his sufferings, our sufferings, are tied together into Christ’s.

But is it suffering for sufferings’ sake? No!--though we don’t always know the reason for some sufferings. But in and through it all, there is the Christian vision that there is divine purpose in human suffering that is borne for Christ’s sake. Thereby the cause of Christ and his kingdom is advanced. Paul writes in Colossians (1:24), *“I am now rejoicing in my sufferings--(he was in prison in Rome)--for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”* You see, what is going on in us ties into the work of Jesus here and now.

That is to say, to follow Christ, to enter into his sufferings, to share the comfort of God with others, is in some real and amazing way, to build up and strengthen the Body of Christ, one another and others. There is an overall purpose in it. And those who receive encouragement from God are qualified to enter sympathetically into the experience of others whose pathway leads them through the vale of tears (vss.4, 6-7). Says one writer, *“sympathy is love perfected by experience.”* The one who has experienced one kind of affliction is particularly qualified to console others in the same or similar circumstances.

Remember the Queen Mother’s words?: *“At last, I can look the east end in the face.”* You see, we learn from Jesus--if we learn from Jesus--both the joyous comfort of God, and the joy of comforting others. As Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,”* (Mt 5:4). We bear witness to that kingdom reality even now.

Of course, last weekend was marked not only by the celebration of the present Queen Elizabeth's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Funerals have begun for the victims of the tragic mass shooting in Orlando. In the midst of much grief, the support of communities, hopefully churches, and even strangers are bringing comfort to the bereft relatives of lost loved ones. One example of bringing comfort is the treatment of deceased victim Luis Capo's grandmother on her JetBlue flight to Orlando. JetBlue employee Kelly Davis Karas detailed what happened in a Facebook post this way:

*"Today my dear friend Melinda and I had the sad privilege of attending to his [Luis's] grandmother on our flight as she made her journey to Orlando to join her family during this unspeakable time. Knowing she was making this hard journey alone, JetBlue employees made sure to be at her side every step of the way. Melinda stood quietly by her wheelchair while we waited until it was time to board. Kellie, the gate agent, boarded with her and helped get her settled. Melinda and I gave her a blanket, a pillow, a box of tissues and water so she could be as comfortable as possible. She was understandably distraught, but met us with kindness and gentleness. And gratitude.*

*But here's where our flight got truly inspiring. I had the idea to pass around a piece of paper to everyone on board and invite them to sign it for this grieving grandmother. I talked it over with Melinda and she started the process from the back of the plane. As we took beverage orders, we whispered a heads up about the plan as we went. Halfway through, Melinda called me, "Kel[ly], I think you should start another paper from the front. Folks are writing PARAGRAPHS." So I did. Then we started one in the middle. Lastly, running out of time on our hour and fifteen minute flight, we handed out pieces of paper to everyone [else] still waiting. When we gathered them together to present them to [the grandmother], we didn't have just a sheet of paper covered in names, which is what I had envisioned. Instead, we had page after page after page after page of long messages offering condolences, peace, love and support. There were even a couple of cash donations, and more than a few tears.*

*...As we deplaned, EVERY SINGLE PERSON STOPPED TO OFFER HER THEIR CONDOLENCES. Some just said they were sorry, some touched her hand, some hugged her, some cried with her. But every single person stopped to speak to her, and not a single person was impatient at the slower deplaning process."*  
--June 15, 2016. Story reported by KTLA, and confirmed by JetBlue spokesman.

I don't know these flight attendants. I don't know any of those people on the plane. I didn't know Luis Capo, and I don't know his grandmother. But I know



this. *“In Christ,”* we have an *“overflowing share in his sufferings,”* and with them *“we have an overflowing share of comfort,”* (vs. 5), so that, *“we can comfort people in every kind of trouble, through the comfort with which God comforts us,”* (vs.4). May the church be ever about that agenda, because that is the agenda that matters. Amen.