

# Consolation

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*The sermon given at Evensong on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*2 Corinthians 1:1-22*

For years, as a boy, I thought the word 'consolation' had something to do with prizes. Perhaps this came from watching too much 'Crackerjack', that children's TV programme where the runners-up in any competition were given a 'Crackerjack' pencil as a consolation prize. It never occurred to me that those who came seconds were expected to be so devastated that they need a special prize simply for the purposes of consoling them. After all, they'd nearly won the big prize, hadn't they?

So imagine my confusion on discovering over and over that the word 'consolation' could also be used in situation that seemed to be the opposite of winning a prize – situations of grief and pain and affliction. Situations where offering a 'Crackerjack' pencil would be a mockery.

Whilst my childhood confusion was simply the result of naivety – or perhaps just not being very bright – it does highlight the ambiguity around the very notion of consolation. A consolation is something good that happens in a situation which is otherwise bad. No-one in their right mind would seek consolation for its own sake – for that would be to seek pain as well. So when St Paul in the first part of his second letter to the Corinthians, which we've heard read this evening, presents God as the God of all consolation, The consolation is experienced in the context of affliction and suffering. He makes the connection between consolation and suffering over and over again, (verse 3): *"The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ."* He continues in similar vein and sums it up saying. *"as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation."*

So for Paul, the experience of suffering does not lead him to conclude that there can be no God; rather, his experience of consolation convinces him that God will remain faithful, however severe the suffering.

This is a point of view we don't hear enough of. Debates about whether God and suffering can co-exist too often end up reaching false conclusions. One side argues that since suffering is real, belief in God is tantamount to believing that the universe is all rainbows and 'My Little Pony'! The other side argues that if there is no God, everything must be dark and meaningless, and there is no justification for getting out of bed in the morning. These arguments maintain that like oil and water, God and suffering cannot mix.

But Paul isn't arguing from the abstract comfort of the Senior Common Room. He's arguing from the experience of real affliction which has led him to the experience of real consolation. Listen to him (verse 8): *"We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself."* This is someone who has reached the end of his tether. But instead of rejecting God as a useless ornament, he concluded that the answer is to open up to God more fully (verse 9): *"Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death, so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."*

Paul seems to be arguing that maybe the reason why more people don't believe in Jesus is not because they have suffered too much, but because they have suffered too little, and have been able to cling to the illusion of human self-sufficiency in which there is no need for God. That might explain why this kind of atheism, based on the incompatibility of God and suffering, is much more common in the relatively comfortable 21<sup>st</sup> century than in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> or any of the centuries where the experience of suffering was much more obvious and harder to hide from; and yet in those earlier centuries when human mortality was a daily reality, atheism was rarely the response.

The basis for Paul's experience of consolation is that Christ has suffered. He has no solution to explain the mystery of suffering; but he does have a gospel with which he

can face suffering and still live hopefully and with humanity, which is the Gospel that Christ's sufferings have a redemptive effect for all of us, because God was in Christ and making himself known more fully on the cross than anywhere else.

So Paul says (verse 5), *"Just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant from Christ"*.

He's back to this idea of consolation. Perhaps the worst aspect of death and suffering is the way it isolates us. When we die, we face death alone. But the death and resurrection of Jesus promises that death cannot finally separate us from the love of God. We may struggle to understand why we are so afflicted, but our consolation is greater.

Years ago, I remember seeing a man interviewed on Songs of Praise. He and his wife had lost a baby boy in one of those unexplained cot deaths. The interviewer gently asked, *"Didn't that turn you away from God?"* He replied, *"Because Jesus suffered on the cross, in a strange way I felt my suffering drew me closer to him."* Perhaps God is to be met in the consolation available in the midst of affliction, rather than seeking to escape that affliction altogether.

Paul affirms that since God consoles us, it is so that we can then reach out and console each other, that mutual consolation might overcome individual isolation; as light overcomes darkness, consolation banishes isolation. The Greek word for consolation is 'paracleseos', the same word sometimes used to describe the Holy Spirit; he is the Paraclete, the comforter, the counsellor, the consoler, the one who stays with us when all others have fled.

So, whatever your experience of affliction, may you discover also the God of consolation, the Son who suffered for our consolation, the Spirit whose nature is to console, and may you be strengthened to share that consolation and make it real for others.

# Reading Texts

## 1 Corinthians 1:1-22

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia: <sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, <sup>4</sup> who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. <sup>6</sup> If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. <sup>7</sup> Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. <sup>8</sup> We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup> He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, <sup>11</sup> as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. <sup>12</sup> Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God—and all the more toward you. <sup>13</sup> For we write you nothing other than what you can read and also understand; I hope you will understand until the end— <sup>14</sup> as you have already understood us in part—that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast. <sup>15</sup> Since I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a double favour; <sup>16</sup> I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea. <sup>17</sup> Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time? <sup>18</sup> As surely as God

is faithful, our word to you has not been "Yes and No." <sup>19</sup> For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." <sup>20</sup> For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. <sup>21</sup> But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, <sup>22</sup> by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment