



Comfort ye my people

Lent Course 2022

**A five-week course for groups and
individuals as we journey through Lent**

With an Introduction from the Bishop of Chichester

DIOCESE OF
CHICHESTER 

Artist: Mark Moyers
By kind permission

A welcome from the Bishop of Chichester

“I’m very well, thank you.” That’s the response we normally give when people ask. It takes quite a lot of courage to say something else. So we live with the stuff that makes us not very well. And that can be a very heavy burden to bear.

The season of Lent offers us an opportunity to lay down the things that burden us. Lent is a season of safety when we can admit that not all is well. It gives us permission to review our lives and be honest about how we damage ourselves, other people and the world we inhabit.

Jesus Christ says to us, “Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). And it is very often a hauntingly beautiful visual image or sound that prompts us to explore this offer of rest and comfort.

The soul that is wearied by the effort of shutting out the hurts and fears within is unlikely to welcome more tasks, more tests, more words and instructions. It is the beauty of God’s unconditional love that comforts and releases us from what we fear.

In the 5 sessions of this year’s Lent Course, we are offered beautiful images, stories and songs that speak of the God who knows us and loves us. In each session someone will speak to you about the comfort that they have found in these gifts. They will invite you to begin your own exploration of how God might lift your burdens and give you space and time to rest.

I wish to thank those who have contributed to this Course and had the courage to say that, though it is not easy, it is possible to live well.

I hope that you, inspired by them, will find that comfort, hope and joy emerge from your Lenten preparation for Holy Week and the triumph of the resurrection.

++ Martin



An introductory Video is available setting the wider context for our Lent course in which Bishop Martin is in conversation with two of our contributors. You can watch it [here](#).

Introduction

Lent, culminating in Easter, is the most special season in the Christian year. Recalling the forty days and forty nights during which Jesus fasted in the desert and rejected Satan's temptations (Matthew 4.1-11), Lent is a time of preparation for celebrating his final victory at Easter in the glory of his cross and resurrection.

It gives us an opportunity to focus afresh on Jesus, to renew our discipleship and to struggle against all forms of sin, in ourselves, in society and in the Church. During the Lenten season Christians prepare for baptism when they are plunged into new life in Christ - rising from the font to live at one with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the community of the Church.

Part of the discipline of this season is growing in self-control. The Bible offers us three traditional means to help this: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

- Prayer means listening more attentively to God's word in Scripture and responding with thanksgiving, penitence and praise
- Fasting means giving up food and drink so that we can share with the needy but could also entail, e.g., fasting from the multitude of images bombarding us through advertising and the internet.
- Almsgiving means giving of ourselves – our money if we can - but even more importantly giving time to anyone in need, especially the lonely and abandoned.

In Lent the Church invites us to deepen our discipleship and grow in relationship with God, to recover our first love of Christ (Revelation 2.4), and to surrender to the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 16.13). It is a time for rediscovering God's love as we prepare for the drama of Christ's death and resurrection in the great three days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The discipline of Lent pushes us forward into life, forward to Christ's Easter joy.

The focus of this year's Lent Course is on God's consolation, as indicated by the quotation from the Prophet Isaiah (40.1). We sometimes associate this theme too narrowly with Advent, but it is very much the heart of our faith, especially at Easter.

Before he suffered, Jesus promised to ask the Father to send us another comforter, the Holy Spirit of truth, to accompany, guide and console us (John 14.16). It is worth stressing that word 'another'.

Jesus himself – God for us - is already the great consoler, Emmanuel, 'God with us' (Matthew 1.23). Christ's demonstration of God's love (Romans 5.8) by laying down his life for his friends (John 15.13) and his glorious resurrection (Matthew 28.6) offer the greatest consolation we can have in this life. The Holy Spirit – God in us – (John 14.17) brings us that consolation and makes it real in our lives as individuals and as communities (1 John 3.24). No matter what difficulties we face - personal problems, crises, tragedies, even a pandemic – 'The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold' (Psalm 46.11).

This Lent Course offers five short spiritual exercises written by clergy of Chichester Diocese. Each one contains four elements:

A powerful image from the Visual Commentary on Scripture Website to awaken vision thevcs.org

A passage from the Bible to invite meditation

A short prayer to lift us up to God

A hymn which we can sing and pray to let our spirits soar

The meditations are also available in the form of short podcasts on the Diocese of Chichester SoundCloud Channel.

With our inner ear attentive to God's call, let us journey together on this 2022 Lenten road. Led by the Spirit we will be brought ever deeper into new life in Christ, who comes to meet us with his Easter greeting of peace (John 20.19).

The Reverend Earl Collins

Continuing Ministerial Development Officer in the Diocese of Chichester



Week 1: Comfort in Music: The Song of Miriam

(Exodus 15.20-21)

The Revered Martha Weatherill is Rural Dean of Chichester and Priest in Charge of Lavant

Bible Reading

Exodus 15.1-3;11; 20-21

The Israelites sang this song to the LORD:
“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and my might
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.
The LORD is a warrior;
the LORD is his name...

“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendour, doing wonders?
Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a
tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after
her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang
to them:
“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

Reflection

I have been reflecting on the power of music, to teach, to soothe, to inspire, to empower, to comfort, to calm, to encourage - to move us to prayer. What songs or hymns do you remember from your childhood? Which ones did you memorise, without even trying to?

Which tunes or words carry you through hard times? Which hymns did you miss most during lockdown? Which ones make your eyes well up with tears because of a memory - a funeral, a wedding or a special event? Which ones make you laugh?

Music can teach a child to read and to sleep. It is also one of the last things to go to in later years: my grandfather-in-law who suffers from dementia still plays the piano beautifully. Dying people sometimes respond to their favourite hymn. Songs can stir up deep memories.

The song of Miriam is an erupting, joyful and comforting song of hope and victory, despite struggles and anxieties. Miriam took up her musical instrument and together with the Israelite community, they all sang a new song. They sang not as sad and neglected people, but as God's chosen people, beloved of God (Jeremiah 32.38).

Despite the fear of death and the unknown, new hope, new possibilities opened before them because of what God had done for his people and what he might do again in the future.

I wonder what new song we will sing beyond the pandemic as we learn to live with Covid? What song are we already singing during the pandemic as we remember God's promise never to leave us or forsake us? The song of Miriam is a song about the amazing works of the Lord and a song about who God is. Here lies the model for true worship.

It teaches us firstly to worship the almighty Lord for what he has previously done and for what he will do in the future and secondly to worship God for who he is. We acknowledge his great acts through joys and sorrows, ups and downs, successes and failures, illness and good health, because whatever happens he remains God – our heavenly Father - and his love for us never changes. His love for us has no bounds. It remains constant.

I once heard a retired priest say, 'God is always in the background even when it does not feel as though he is'. The easiest way to remind ourselves and to encourage us to trust in God's faithfulness is to sing songs of praise and worship to God. Singing is one of the purest forms of praying, as St Augustine affirmed when he wrote, "To sing is to pray twice".

Hymn

Our God, Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to Come *(Isaac Watts)*

Our God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home:

Under the shadow of your throne
your saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is your arm alone,
and our defence is sure.

Before the hills in order stood
or earth received its frame,
from everlasting you are God,
to endless years the same.

A thousand ages in your sight
are like an evening gone,
short as the watch that ends the night
before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
soon bears us all away;
we fly forgotten, as a dream
dies at the opening day.

Our God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
still be our guard while troubles last,
and our eternal home!

Prayer

God of comfort and love, we give you thanks for your promises and your ever-abiding presence with us during difficult and fearful times.

May your Holy Spirit, the Comforter, remain among individuals, families, communities and nations during the pandemic and beyond.

May our trust in you be affirmed as we worship you in Spirit and in truth.

We ask this 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 forever.

Amen.



TILMAN RIEMENSCHNEIDER
The Lauffer Pieta

Week 2: Comfort in Mothering: Mary, Grief and Sadness

(Luke 2.34-35; John 19.25-30)

The Reverend Jess Reid is Priest in Charge of New Fishbourne and Apuldram

Bible Reading

Luke 2.34-35

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

John 19.25-30

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Reflection

Mary with the dead body of Jesus is a moment of devastation. This is not a mother in beatific adoration at a crib, or with stoic reserve standing at the foot of the Cross. It is a collapse of the natural order, not a child safely seated in a lap, reaching upward to touch the face of the beloved, but the sprawling useless limbs of a son, clutched one final time by his mother.

A lifetime ago, Mary carried the infant Jesus into the temple, her heart ablaze with that heady love a newborn calls forth; the wonder at each sublime millimetre, the curve of an earlobe, every tiny perfect hair. And, at the sight of the Son of God carried reverently into his Father's house, Simeon rushed forth with his prophetic words of hope, salvation, and death: "This child is destined to be a sign that will be opposed ...and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

When Simeon pronounced his weighty words, I do not think Mary was surprised. At the heart of the fierce love of motherhood is the profound awareness of your child's fragility, their miraculous existence in a world full of pain and death. Who knew, more than Mary, that a sword would pierce her very soul? She knew it in the depths of the night as she watched the rise and fall of her infant son's chest, would know it in every moment as her baby grew: the toddler racing ahead, the child so self-possessed, the adult whom she followed as he brought the news of his Father's love and healing to Israel.

The pieta is a moment of devastation yes, but not defeat. The images of Mary holding the dead Christ are full of the same exquisite tenderness that we see in images of Mary cradling her infant: they radiate love. If Christ's teaching were empty, if all ends with the cruelty of the cross, with the shuddering reality of death, if evil is triumphant, then his mother would turn her back and walk away from the mortal remains of her son, not gather him to her chest, nor press her cheek to his. If Christ's teaching were empty, then you and I would never choose to open our hearts in love to one another. The risk of loss, the pain of grief, is simply too great to endure; we know, do we not, that love leads inexorably to the cross and death?

And yet every moment of our lives is marked by our faltering and hopeful attempts to love one another. We learn the innermost heart of those we love best, even though human memory cannot carry the intricacies of another person in their entirety. We rejoice in things that, to an outsider, are nothing more than ordinary, find our gladness in the smallest of their achievements. We do so in defiance of a world that tries to make statistics out of people or rank their worth according to their worldly success. We do this because in every moment, even in the darkest moments of grief, the light of the resurrection breaks through and proclaims, if only in a whisper, that God so loved the world.

The sight of Mary, holding the body of her son, may not seem a comfort. It should, by rights, be too painful to contemplate, but it is not. In asking his mother to love him and to bear the pain of his death, Jesus has asked more than it should be possible to give, and yet he has made it possible. With her heart open to love and so to loss, Mary professes the most profound faith in the promise of her Son that even death is no barrier to the love of God.

Hymn

Sing We of the Blessed Mother

(G.B. Timms)

Sing we of the blessed Mother
who received the angel's word,
and obedient to his summons
bore in love the infant Lord;
sing we of the joys of Mary
at whose breast that Child was fed
Who is Son of God eternal
and the everlasting Bread.

Sing we, too, of Mary's sorrows,
of the sword that pierced her through,
when beneath the cross of Jesus
she his weight of suffering knew,
looked upon her Son and Saviour
reigning high on Calvary's tree,
saw the price of man's redemption
paid to set the sinner free.

Sing again the joys of Mary
when she saw the risen Lord,
and in prayer with Christ's apostles,
waited on his promised word:
from on high the blazing glory
of the Spirit's presence came,
heavenly breath of God's own being,
manifest through wind and flame.

Prayer

Almighty God, when your Son was lifted high on the Cross, his mother stood close by and shared his suffering.

Grant that we too, gazing on him with love and following him to the cross, may come to know the power of his resurrection, for he is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

Amen.



SEBASTIANO DEL PIOMBO
INCORPORATING DESIGNS
BY MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI
The Raising of Lazarus

Week 3: Comfort in the Resurrection

(John 11.1-44)

The Reverend Dr Jack Dunn is Canon Precentor of Chichester

Bible Reading

John 11.1-44

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Contd...

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Reflection

I wonder if there is a verse from the Bible that you keep going back to in times of difficulty and distress? I wonder what it is, and why? Perhaps you might feel comfortable enough sharing this within your church family or even with friends and family outside of church?

The verse that I hold tightly to takes me straight back to my first Monday morning as a newly ordained priest. I was serving my title in West London.

Opposite one of the two churches that I ministered in, was a busy hospital.

As morning prayer ended that Monday morning, a family tentatively shuffled through the door. A father and a sister, to be precise. They were in a bad way.

Their son and their brother, in his early twenties, had just died in the hospital opposite. He had died, I learnt, from a very aggressive form of cancer. They wanted someone to come and to say prayers with them and to anoint his body.

The first thing that struck me as I entered that small, windowless basement hospital room with its artificial light turned down low to convey feelings of warmth and comfort and perhaps timelessness, was a wall of grief. You could feel it as you walked into the room.

The young man, who was tightly bound to his bed by a simple white hospital sheet, was surrounded by his mother and his younger sister. The hospital had done their very best for him, but I could see that he had clearly died in great pain. I will never forget his face and the positioning of his body. A body that was still warm to the touch, though the room already smelt of death. A son had just died. A brother was now dead. And while his father and his mother were numb with grief, his sisters were furious. The white heat of their anger was more than just in their eyes. What on earth could I say to them?

Well, as tears came to my own eyes, where I began, was at John Chapter 11, verse 35: 'Jesus wept.' Over the years, this verse has carried me through so many difficult moments. As a boy, I was taught that men don't cry. Instead, we brush ourselves down and we get on with it. We soldier on. For men, I was taught, are meant to model an invincible kind of strength for the world. But Jesus, the perfect man, cried and, and I have always given thanks to God for that.

Before the consolation of the resurrection with its promise of eternal life, Jesus Christ provides each of us with the comfort of his tears. We know that Jesus himself has both tasted and defeated death. The account of Lazarus' death, that we have before us, reminds us that Jesus has also borne the deep pain and anguish that bereavement can bring. How often, down the years, have I heard these words at the bedside of someone who has just died: 'I just wish it could have been me instead.'

Sisters and brothers, friends, these words of grief and of pain and of loss are so much more common than we all realise. A desire to bear the pain of death because bearing the pain of loss of someone that you love feels so much harder to cope with. The sad fact is that so often we don't realise this because we refuse to talk about death. It's a topic that we cross over the road to avoid.

Jesus didn't. And if Jesus didn't, dear sisters and brothers and friends, nor must we. Indeed, I've often wondered how our church families might serve our wider communities and each other through a ministry of talking about death? Perhaps by coming together and offering bereavement cafes in our communities for example, or by offering regular study days on death, open to anyone to attend. My experience with that family in that claustrophobic tomb-like room, inspired me to offer a study day on death, dying and bereavement in the parish where I served my curacy. We invited a wide range of people to talk to members of the parish, from the pews and from further afield, about different aspects of death, dying and bereavement.

A palliative care nurse spoke about what happens when we die and the sorts of things that we might expect to encounter in the immediate hours and minutes leading up to death. A solicitor specialising in wills talked to us about what we might consider when drawing up a will and what probate really entails.

An undertaker came to speak about planning a funeral; while my wise, inspirational and deeply faithful training incumbent closed the day with a talk offering a beautiful meditation on the Christian theology of death.

Yes, Jesus weeps with us and there is great comfort to be found in those tears, but those tears are not the end, just as Lazarus' death was not the end of the story and nor is Jesus Christ's death the end of the story. For Jesus' words to Martha are Jesus' words to each one of us: 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?' (John 11.25-26)

I wonder, what does that resurrection belief mean to you? I wonder how, having been called by name, as Jesus called Lazarus by name out from the tomb, and as Jesus calls each of us by name, do we seek to share the living consolation of this resurrection belief with others?

Dear sisters, brothers and friends, unless we are prepared to unbind death by talking about it openly together, by naming our fears and confronting our concerns, we cannot hope to understand the meaning of the resurrection.

For no matter how much we might like to, we simply cannot jump from Palm Sunday straight to Easter Sunday and ignore what happens in between.

Hymn

Drop, drop, slow tears,
(*Phineas Fletcher and Orlando Gibbons*)

Drop, drop, slow tears,
and bathe those beauteous feet,
which brought from heav'n
the news and Prince of peace.

Cease not, wet eyes,
his mercies to entreat;
to cry for vengeance
sin doth never cease.

In your deep floods
drown all my faults and fears;
nor let his eye
see sin, but through my tears.

You can hear this Hymn [here](#)

Prayer

Watch, O Lord, with those who wake, or watch, or weep tonight, and give your angels charge over those who sleep.

Tend your sick ones O Lord Christ.

Rest your weary ones.

Bless your dying ones.

Soothe your suffering ones.

Pity your afflicted ones.

Shield your joyous ones.

All for your love's sake.

Amen.

Attributed to St Augustine



UNKNOWN ARTIST
Ascension and Pentecost,
Late 11th century,
Stone relief sculpture,
Cloister of the Monastery
of Santo Domingo de Silos,
Spain,

Week 4: Comfort from the Holy Spirit

(Acts 2.1-13)

By Reverend Canon Archie Coates – Vicar of St Peter's Brighton

Bible Reading

Acts of the Apostles 2.1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

Reflection

As Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for his passion, the most alarming feature for them was the bombshell that he must leave them. They had left everything to follow him and now he was going! And furthermore, how could he possibly be the promised Messiah if he wasn't going to hang around long enough to see off the Roman occupation?

How beautiful then was Jesus' insistence that his departure would actually be a good thing for his followers and the world, not only because it would mean his passing through the history-changing events of the Cross and Resurrection, but also because of what would be given to them after his death, resurrection and ascension – the gift of the Holy Spirit. They would be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49) as his very presence came to live inside each and every one of them. No wonder Jesus felt his departure in the flesh was actually precipitating a good thing. And at Pentecost, a few days after the Ascension, it happened: "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4); the presence of Jesus, now sitting on the right hand of the Father in heaven (once described as the 'control centre of the earth') now touches the hearts of believers on earth, as we see depicted here.

As Peter declares in his sermon following the Pentecost event, this promise of the Holy Spirit, the presence of Jesus, is a 'gift' for all who put their trust in Jesus, his saving death and resurrection (Acts 2:38-39).

The reality that we are each able to have the presence of Jesus for ourselves, through His Holy Spirit – what does that mean? How does his presence show up in our lives, what does the 'gift' look like, how does the Holy Spirit manifest himself in practice? Well, though there are many characteristics of the Holy Spirit when he is present in our lives – he brings love, joy, peace and all the other fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23 – in amongst all these is the word that Jesus himself used to describe the Holy Spirit whom he promised to his disciples. When Jesus spoke to his disciples about the Holy Spirit, over and over again, he called the Holy Spirit “the Comforter” (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). Actually, this Greek word *parakletos*, can be translated in a variety of ways. Some translations have 'Advocate', some “Counsellor”. I like the thought that God through the Holy Spirit is my advocate, who is of course someone who stands up for you in a court of law, who speaks on your behalf and defends you, bringing all their expertise and experience to act on your behalf. How wonderful that God is so practical and helpful, so on our side, especially in times when life is difficult.

However, the literal meaning of *parakletos* is 'one called alongside'. In New Testament times, if a boat got into difficulty on the Mediterranean, a bigger boat would come alongside the smaller one and guide them to the safety of harbour. This is the image Jesus is using to describe who the Holy Spirit is to us, a comforter indeed. I don't know how your life is working or not working out right now, but one of the things I like most about being a Christian is that I have with me, in fact living inside of me, consistently and reliably, one who has chosen to come alongside me, a comforter. Through the Holy Spirit, the promise of Jesus is really true: “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20).

Hymn

Hymn Of The Holy Spirit (Pat Barrett)

Holy Spirit, guide my vision
Help me see the way You see
Always Jesus, ever Jesus
Christ in all is Christ in me
Holy Spirit, guide my speaking
Words of grace in truth abound
Let my lips be filled with stories
Of the mercy that I've found

You're the light
You're my path
You're the shepherd of my soul
All I am
All I have
Holy Spirit, lead me on

Holy Spirit, guide my hearing
Wake my ears to words You speak
In the thunder and the stillness
Let Your voice be clear in me
Let Your voice be clear in me

You're the light
You're my path
You're the shepherd of my soul
All I am
All I have
Holy Spirit, lead me on
Oh, You're the light
You're my path
You're the shepherd of my soul
All I am
All I have
Holy Spirit, lead me on

Holy Spirit, lead me onward
Walking through the great unknown
Trusting, leaning, holding, clinging
Till the day You lead me home

Oh, guide my feet
Oh, guide my feet
Lead me on
Lead me on, Lord
Holy Spirit, open up my eyes
Holy Spirit, open up my heart
Open up my ears
Onwards You show me where You lead me
I will follow

You're the light
You're my path
You're the shepherd of my soul
All I am
All I have
Holy Spirit, lead me on
Holy Spirit, lead me on

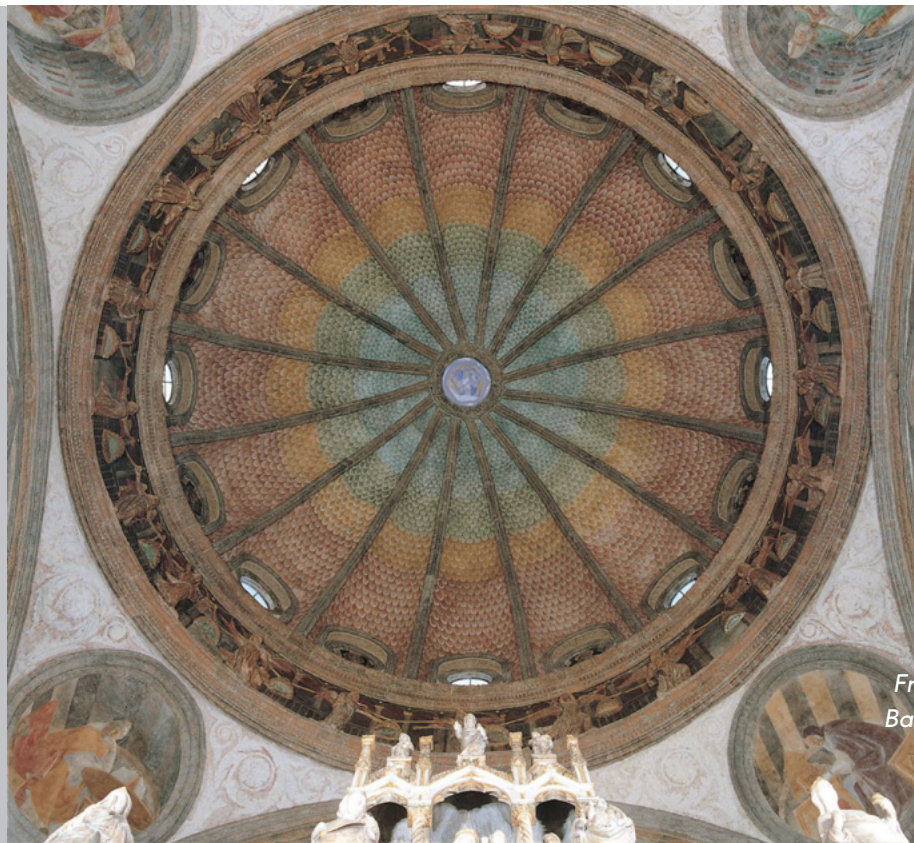
Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit, my comforter.

Thank you that you promise to be always at my side.

Fill me afresh today please with your Holy Spirit, that I may know your strength, your guidance and your help in all that I do.

Amen



VINCENZO FOPPA
Dome, c.1462–68,
Fresco, Portinari Chapel,
Basilica of Sant'Eustorgio,
Milan

Week 5: Comfort from God's Covenant - Love

(Genesis 8.20-9.17)

By The Venerable Martin Lloyd Williams, Archdeacon of Brighton & Lewes

Bible Reading

(Genesis 8.20-9.17)

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.'

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human shall that person's blood be shed;
for in his own image
God made humankind.

And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.'

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

contd...

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'

When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

Reflection

How do I cope with disappointments? How do I process my experiences of loss, bewilderment and confusion? How do I navigate a world that suddenly seems to be uncertain and a total mystery to me?

Isaiah wrote his words of comfort to people, like us, who asked these questions. They were in exile. This same people told themselves stories as they looked for a narrative which would help them make sense of their distress.

One of those stories was about Noah and the chaos and destruction that befell creation. Everything was washed away. All was destroyed. Just one single family remained along with the animals they had gathered.

As they told this story, the exiled people of Israel tried to work out what God was like. They described the conversation that was going on within God's inner being. God is not distant and dispassionate their story went. Rather God is deeply grieved and troubled in heart. For one hundred and fifty days after the flood God pondered what to do next. All the while Noah and his floating zoo sailed across a sea of uncertainty with no horizon in sight.

Then God remembered Noah. God remembered. The waters receded. Noah, his family and all the animals emerged onto dry land. Noah built an altar and gave thanks. Those telling the story of Noah shared the conviction that God's memory of us is the last ground for hope in the face of death. Job wrote something similar, "if only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me until your anger has passed! If only you would set a time and then remember me." "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," said the thief crucified next to Jesus. God remembered Noah, he remembered Job and the thief too. Remembering Noah caused a shift in the heart of God. A shift from hostility to commitment.

"Remember me Lord" is a prayer I have often repeated gently to myself as I have sought to enter stillness in times of silence. I have often suggested it to others too. I can recall being with a youth group once, telling them to repeat the phrase, remember me Lord, slowly, gently and silently for just five minutes. I was convinced they would think it was weird. When the five minutes was over, we simply continued to sit in silence for five more minutes. For many it was a transformative moment.

Again, the story tellers described the thoughts whirling inside God's inner being. "Never again," said God in the depths of his heart, "never again will I curse the ground because of human beings." And at that moment God committed himself to unlimited patience. God knew that humankind had not fundamentally changed. But this episode had somehow brought about a change in God. As the exiled Israelites told this story, they didn't tell a story about a strong God and a needy world, they told a story about a grieving God and a resistant world. And as God established a new covenant with the earth, he says never again on five occasions. Never again will all life be destroyed, he says repeatedly.

And so, the cause-and-effect connection of guilt to punishment is broken. God has changed his mind. God does what human being find it so hard to do. He becomes unconcerned about the moral high ground. He established a new covenant knowing that we need to be converted. The story of Noah was told for various reasons. One of those reasons was to understand better what God was like. Our understanding of what God is like often requires conversion.

Sr Joan Chittister OSB has pointed that, "Some believe in a God of wrath and become wrathful with others as a result. Some believe in a God who is indifferent to the world and when they find themselves all alone, shrivel up and die inside from the indifference they feel in the world around them. Some believe in a God who makes traffic lights turn green and so become the children of magical coincidence. Some believe in a God of laws and crumble in spirit when they themselves break them or become stern, demanding from others standards they cannot keep themselves. They conceive of God as the manipulator of the universe rather than its blessing-maker."

Here is a story of conversion in the heart of God. Everything is changed. He is now committed to remembering, and never again causing destruction. And so the foundation for our own conversion is laid. The new covenant is made not just with humankind. All living things and the very earth itself are God's covenant partners now. The newly revealed earth is consequently sacred. The earth is itself in dynamic relationship with God. Creation speaks of God. All the world is so much more than a stage. Humankind now has the possibility of being caught up in a whirlwind of creativity and grace and new life. This is life under the rainbow.

Hymn

I have this hope

Ben Fielding/Dean Ussher

I have this hope
As an anchor for my soul
Through every storm
I will hold to You

With endless love
All my fear is swept away
In everything
I will trust in You

There is hope in the promise of the cross
You gave everything to save the world You love
And this hope is an anchor for my soul
Our God will stand unshakable

Unchanging One
You who was and is to come
Your promise sure
You will not let go

There is hope in the promise of the cross
You gave everything to save the world You love
And this hope is an anchor for my soul
Our God will stand unshakable

There is hope in the promise of the cross
You gave everything to save the world You love
And this hope is an anchor for my soul

Our God will stand unshakable
Your Name is higher
Your Name is greater
All my hope is in You

Your word unfailing
Your promise unshaken
All my hope is in You

Prayer

Please simply slowly repeat the prayer "Remember me Lord" silently for up to 5 minutes