

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Comfort one another

Presented by David Reay

An elderly Chinese philosopher was once approached by a grieving mother who had lost her only son. She wanted his counsel and help to overcome her grief. He replied that he would only be able to help her if she brought a mustard seed from a home where there had never been any sorrow. So the woman went off in search of such a mustard seed and the answer to her problems. But every place she visited there had been sorrow. And so she returned to the philosopher and told him she had discovered no mustard seed because she had not encountered any sorrow free home. The philosopher replied that she had in fact learnt the most basic of lessons in regard to sorrow and loss. They are universal, and such understanding might help her help others and so help herself.

Today we consider how we can comfort one another in our times of loss and sadness

Because sorrow and loss are universal, so is the need for comfort. The Bible speaks of our bearing one another's burdens, and grief is certainly one such burden. Comforting one another is an act of compassionate love to those who are in special need of it. And each one of us will have special need of it one day.

To comfort is to come alongside to help someone. It is used in Christian writing to describe the Holy Spirit as one who comes alongside. Our focus will be on comfort in times of loss. This loss need not be the loss of someone through death. We need comfort when we face the breakdown of a relationship; when we face the loss of meaning through loss of job or vocation; when we face disappointment or the fading of a dream; when we leave one place for another; when age or infirmity or geography moves us into a new season of life.

Some of these experiences are more profound than others, but we still need comforting. It is a big mistake to think comfort is only required when death is concerned, or where there is an objectively great loss. We need comfort many times over in the normal seasons of our lives. What we might consider a minor matter can well be something very major for someone else.

God through his Spirit is the prime comforter. But God chooses human instruments. To call out to God for comfort is to invite others to comfort us. We need God with skin on in our times of sorrow. God designed us in such a way that we only flourish in life if we support one another.

What makes a good comforter? Paul gives us one clue when he writes to the Christians at a church in Corinth. He speaks of his profound suffering and sorrow. He has tasted loss. And he goes on to say that this painful experience is used by God to enable him to help others passing through troubled times. Those who have tasted loss and processed it are best able to comfort others. This perspective actually allows us to endure loss more meaningfully. We see it as a chance to be better equipped to help others.

One danger of this, though, is that we can too easily assume my own loss is identical to someone else's loss. While there are common features to all grief and sorrow, each loss is unique. We will be uniquely affected. So beware the phrase, "I know exactly how you feel." You don't and can't. But through your own experience you may certainly know something of how they feel. Only our creator knows precisely how we feel.

It is all too easy to jump in and offer help and what we think are wise words based on what he have been through. But this is to overlook the uniqueness of personal loss. By all means learn from your own experience, by all means share something of your experience. But don't impose that experience on others. And the key to a wise use of our own experiences is to be slower to speak and quicker to listen. Only as we listen to the other person can we truly understand their situation. Otherwise we will simply read our own history into their circumstances.

To comfort we need to listen. One of the most precious gifts we can give anyone is our focused attention. So often we don't listen. What the other person is saying is sometimes not even heard, or if it is heard, it is not grasped. We simply use it for fodder to feed our own contribution. To listen is to respect the other person and have a focus on them. To listen is to hear their own unique perspective on what might be a very common loss.

Listening is hard work. It means we might feel helpless. We might be at a loss for words. We might not grasp what is going on. But this is to merely admit our own limitations, our own humanity. We are not gods, we are fallible yet hopefully caring individuals who do what we can to comfort others.

Comforters need to be patient. Loss and grief aren't overcome quickly. One prayer, one meeting, one conversation won't do the trick. To rush things is to heal a wound too lightly. To rush things is to feed our own desire that things be sorted out and fixed up. Comforters won't go for the quick fix because they realise there are no quick fixes.

In the book of *JOB*, his friends offered all sorts of advice that seemed orthodox enough but didn't really express the heart of God. They were too neat, too intent on blaming and defining and analysing. They couldn't live with mystery and accept the fact that sometimes we just don't know what is going on and why it is going on. So they wanted to rush things and get it all sorted out. That might help them but it wouldn't do much for Job.

And comforters are to be practical. Listening carefully and speaking wisely are essential. But sometimes we need to act. We actually do something to practically help. It may be offering to mind a child; putting the kettle on; making a meal; offering a lift; answering a phone; cleaning a house.

Comforters must not have a controlling tendency or spirit. So many people want to control others and they seek to do so by offering counsel and comfort. These are the people who will transfer their experiences onto others very readily. Who will meddle and pry. Who will try to be the sole source of comfort. Who will be rather dogmatic with advice and lay on the Bible texts heavily.

The best comforters are well grounded in the truths of the Christian faith. This helps them provide the right comfort at the right time. The best sort of comfort comes not from pop psychology or our own experience. It comes from what we understand of God and his dealings with us. We do use our own experience. But we put this experience in a wider context of God's dealings with us.

When we comfort, we incarnate or embody the love of God, but also the wisdom of God. We speak from his heart and mind. To do so, we need to know something of his heart and mind. Thus to truly comfort we need to be students of the Bible, regular worshippers, and in significant fellowship with other Christians. Because these are means by which we better know God.

So we best comfort someone when we patiently listen to them. We bring to bear on their situation our own experience of loss enabling us to be wise and compassionate, though avoiding the temptation to transfer our own unique experience onto them. We seek to help and be an instrument of God's love rather than trying to control or encourage excess dependence. We think of practical ways of helping. We stay deeply in touch with God so our comfort will be deep and wise.

And what will result from such comfort? We help people move on in life. Not to forget the sorrow or bury or deny it. But to integrate it into their memory and life and allow it to enrich their life. This doesn't call the loss good in itself, but rather acknowledges that it can be used for good. Comforters are not like fire blankets, snuffing out any problems. They are not pouring oil on troubled waters. They are not the ones who wipe away all the tears. Rather they are the ones who help give meaning to the tears and even give permission to shed tears.

We help people retain hope. Because we can face a lot of loss but when we lose hope we lose everything. We point people to God because he is the source of true hope. He assures us there is a purpose to our pain, there is an end in sight. Faith, hope and love keep on in the midst of our loss and when we comfort rightly we point people to the God who is the source of these. The Bible speaks of followers of Jesus being those who grieve yet grieve hopefully. They know that loss and sadness are very real, but are not the final reality. The faithfulness and loving kindness of God is the ultimate reality. Comfort doesn't deny pain or sadness but puts it in its proper perspective.

This is another reason why comforters are to be those deeply connected with God. It is God who assures us of the deeper reality of his own goodness amidst the badness. It is Jesus who tells us that in the case of grief through death that death itself need not be the end. Those who trust in his mercy and seek his help will die physically but will then experience ongoing life in the presence of God. Death is the end not of our life story but one chapter in our life story. It is an end and a beginning. A true comforter will not use such truth to cheer someone up or persuade them not to cry. They will rather point to this wider context and the hope it offers.

Christian churches become more encouraging and helpful places when we comfort others. It reminds us that despite all our shortcomings, we are hurting people who need comfort and who can provide comfort. Any church is a community of the broken hearted. The church is never a gathering of super spiritual types who are powering ahead come what may. It is always a gathering of people who in various ways are experiencing loss and who therefore are in need of comfort.

My own life is enriched as I become a comforter to others. My experience of painful loss becomes not a stumbling block but an opportunity for personal growth and the means by which I can better enrich the lives of others. I move beyond my self-absorbed focus on my own loss and am freed to minister to others in loss.

And yet we can be hindered in this if we have not faced our own loss and pain. I can never be a comfort to others in their grief if I have not embraced my own grief. If I am busy running away from my own dark times I will not be inclined to help others face similar times.

This is why we bear one another's burdens. That those burdens of today and yesterday can be transformed by the grace of God into the blessings of tomorrow.

We conclude with comforting words which remind us that our ultimate comfort does come from God himself.

Do not look forward to the changes and chances of this life in fear. Rather look to them with full hope that as they come upon you, God will deliver you. He has kept you till now, and if you will only hold on to his dear hand, he will safely lead you through all things. And when you cannot stand, he will bear you in his arms. Do not fear what may happen tomorrow. Our Father God will either shield you from suffering or give you the strength to bear it.

(St Francois de Sales...adapted)