

Comfortable Words- A Sermon for Trinity 11
(Jeremiah 23 vv 23-29, Hebrews 11 v29 – 12 v2, Luke 12 vv 49-56)

Our prayer books provide us with four biblical texts for use just before or just after the Confession in our services of Holy Communion. These are they and they are called *the Comfortable Words*.

Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.

Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Hear also what St Paul saith.

This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Hear also what St John saith.

If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins.

They are wonderful words and I chose the passage from which the first sentence comes for the Gospel reading on the day I was instituted as Rector of Cuxton and Halling, 2nd January 1987. Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

The world desperately needs Jesus and this is what Church is all about. You and I desperately need Jesus to get us through this life and to bring us to the next. So does the world out there. Jesus says, Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. He says it to you and to me. Hopefully we receive His words into our hearts and share them with the world out there.

We read about wars and natural disasters. We read about and may even experience crime and family breakdown. We know that there are lives devastated by alcohol and other drugs. We know that we desperately need Jesus and so does the world out there. We are people in need of comfort and Christ is our Comforter. He Himself is our Comforter and He sends another Comforter, the Holy Spirit, Who is of course His own Spirit and the Spirit of God the Father, to comfort us and to comfort the world.

So far, so comfortable. Unfortunately, the word comfort has, at some stage, been mugged. The “fort” part is the same “fort” as in fortification and fortress and indeed fort. Finding comfort is about finding strength. Jesus is indeed our Comforter. So is the Holy Spirit. God gives us strength to endure hardship and to resist temptation. When God comforts us, perhaps He does make the nasty pain go away, but often His comfort is about giving us the strength to bear it. God’s comfort is about giving us the strength to continue as Christians and to bring God’s comfort to the world out there which so desperately needs it.

So, when we think of Christ as our Comforter, our minds should not be on armchairs, well sprung mattresses and warm duvets.

In Jeremiah's time the message from God was clear. If the Israelites continued in their worship of false gods, if they exploited the poor, cheated their customers, neglected their widows and orphans and oppressed the foreigners who lived among them, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, would besiege their city and destroy it. Their only hope was to hear God's Word, spoken by the true prophets, and repent. Otherwise, the city and their civilisation would be destroyed. Jeremiah preached the truth and became very unpopular. He was mocked, forced into hiding, put in the stocks, imprisoned, starved and nearly killed for his faithfulness to God's message. Other false prophets were much more comforting in the weak, modern sense of the word. They told people what they wanted to hear, that everything would be all right. God would always look after them because Jerusalem was the Holy City. The false prophets had easy lives and were popular with the people. They also helped to bring about the disaster which eventually occurred. The Jewish people refused to return to God and repent of their sins and Nebuchadnezzar did indeed destroy their city and their Temple. It was Jeremiah who truly loved the Jews, telling them the truth, even though it was not what they wanted to hear. The false prophets gave them false comfort telling them what they wanted to hear, which, unfortunately, was not true. I must finish the story for you. After the final collapse of the Jewish state, Nebuchadnezzar offered Jeremiah a nice home in Babylon. Jeremiah said that his loyalty was to his own people and stayed in the Holy Land. Nebuchadnezzar appointed a Jewish man to govern Judaea, but a group of very foolish army officers assassinated him. They in turn were either killed or exiled and the remaining Jews were afraid of reprisals. They asked Jeremiah to pray to God for guidance as to whether to stay and face the music or to become refugees in Egypt. Jeremiah, guided by God, warned them that to go to Egypt would just result in further disasters and that they should stay in Israel. They disregarded his advice yet again and went to Egypt, but Jeremiah still remained loyal to God's people and went with them to face whatever trouble awaited them there. God comforted Jeremiah. He gave him the strength to remain faithful despite all the opposition and persecution.

Those characters we read about in Hebrews didn't have it easy either, *Mocked, imprisoned, stone, tormented, sawn asunder, slain with sword*, as we sing. God doesn't promise His friends an easy life, but He does promise to be with them in the valley of the shadow of death, complete with rod and staff to comfort us. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and we do look to Jesus the beginning and the end of our faith.

He does set a fire on earth. He creates division. You are either with Him, comforted by Him, strengthened to withstand whatever the world can throw at you, strengthened to comfort the world with Christ's comfort, or you are against Him, lounging on the mouldy, moth-eaten sofa of false comfort, of use neither to God nor to humanity. It is up to us to interpret the times.

Hymn A&M 304: Hark the Sound of Holy Voices.