

Trinity 8 2019 Matins

“Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ.....who consoles us in all our affliction” words of St Paul, that we heard at the beginning of our second lesson this morning. Like me, I am sure, you know people who would have great difficulty sharing such a confident expression of faith. We will all know people who have suffered affliction of some kind or another and found it seemingly impossible to find consolation in the God, whom they have always been taught... is love.

The first thing we need to be clear about here is that in the New Testament, the Greek word that has been translated into modern English as “consolation” has -as is so often the case – a richer meaning which implies – not sympathy and tender loving care, but rather *an active strengthening of the person’s spirit in order to ride out - and deal with - affliction.*

What Paul is saying here is that God will give us, through Christ, the strength and the means to deal with affliction, even though, as I have said, not everyone finds that easy to believe. And, what’s more, the whole thrust of Paul’s message here - and indeed elsewhere - is that affliction does not imply weakness, defeat or disgrace. Rather, it opens up the door to dependence upon God, and becomes a means of his grace.

No one wishes affliction on people, but in Christian tradition, without it there would be no love and no human growth.

Imagine a life without *loneliness*. How, in that case, would one come to know the joy of human fellowship? Imagine a life without *limits*...Nothing inaccessible, nothing forbidden, nothing out of reach: ice cream all the

time! How, in that case could human beings ever experience wonder, gratitude or surprise.

As we know, *temptation* causes human suffering, but what would life be if we were all programmed to be good all the time, to do the right thing always and every time. In that case what would good or right or wrong actually mean?

Anxiety produces untold suffering and can lead to despair. But who in a life entirely free of anxiety could ever know comfort, relief or joy? I believe that life without any suffering would be no life at all.

Nevertheless, it is important to draw the line between suffering through which we can grow, and suffering *that ceases to serve life*. I believe that there is a form of suffering that is part of the created order that God has made and that He does not intend that we live out our days in an absolutely pain-free existence. In order to grow, an element of struggle is part of life.

The older I get, the more I realise that by denying pain, anxiety or affliction, we avoid spiritual growth. In our Western world we can become so obsessed with progress and with upward mobility, that we can forget Paul's affirmation elsewhere in this letter to the Corinthians that "*When we are weak, we are strong*"

We often don't discover God's love until we have made a mess of life and received forgiveness or emerged from some painful experience. But the consolation offered through life in Christ will not only make us feel forgiven but will enable us to grow.

Both our readings this morning are about restoration and consolation in the sense that I have described. For Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah,

whom we also heard from this morning, it's more about *punishment* – the punishment of exile preparing the way for restoration and a new King.

But for Paul, it is the active strengthening of the person in their suffering, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that not only gives us the tools to cope with it, but which also witnesses to the authority of Christ in our lives.