

Sunday 14th July - That's The Spirit! : Comfort

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[0 : 00] So today we're going to be continuing the series that Matt started on That's the Spirit, which is a series of talks looking at the Holy Spirit, looking at how God is present with us and how God's presence, the Holy Spirit, shapes us individually as people, affects the way we see the world and the way we behave.

If you're here for the first time or you've missed a few, these talks are well worth a look, especially the one Matt did last week on Grace, which is on YouTube, and that was fantastic. So following that is always going to be a challenge.

This week, we're going to talk a bit about the spirit of comfort or how the Holy Spirit can and does comfort people in the world, how the Holy Spirit soothes our fears and our pains and helps us to feel at ease with our anxieties.

Now, it's obviously not always the case that everyone is always at ease, but I do believe that we can turn to the Holy Spirit in difficult, testing, troublesome times, and God will comfort us, soothe our fears and strengthen us.

This is something that both Matt and I say as part of the funeral services when we lead those. We say that the same God in heaven is the God on earth, and that's a God who will comfort us in grief and pain if we let them.

[1 : 28] So we're going to be looking at one particular passage, only a tiny, small nugget of a passage, which is a terrible way of doing biblical interpretation. So do look at the whole passage in its entirety afterwards.

But this is a passage from Matthew, where Jesus says, come to me, all you who are weary and who are carrying heaven burdens, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn for me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Now this is a passage that speaks to people in a whole range of ways. It speaks to people who've really reached the end of their tether. People who feel beat up or burnt out, overwhelmed by feelings and responsibilities that they carry.

People who know their faults and failings, and who feel short of the mark and chewed up. People who remember deeply that they are made of dust and earth, and fear that they may be a disappointment.

[2 : 38] People carrying more than they should, who feel under pressure to achieve and prove themselves. And perhaps, perhaps today, you've come to church feeling a bit like that. And we promise that God is always there and willing to carry our burdens and provide rest for our souls.

We do promise that, but it does sometimes seem like, in the moment, people do still experience grief, pain, and anxiety. We have to ask, why do people who do give their burdens to God still suffer from pain, anxiety, and fear?

And I'm going to unpack that a bit today, providing some possible answers, which may or may not be helpful. But they're answers that I've kind of walked with this year, through my own journey of grief.

Let's look again at what Jesus says. Jesus says, come to me. Come to me, take up my yoke, and learn from me. Those are the messages which Jesus is asking from other people.

He reminds us that he is gentle and humble in heart, and promises us deep rest for the souls. But what does that mean? What does it mean when Jesus says, come to me?

[3 : 52] What does it even mean to come to God, who is already everywhere, to come to the Holy Spirit today? Well, when I think of the Holy Spirit, the first picture that comes into my head is always breath.

The Spirit being like breath, so close in the lungs, the chest, the lips. There in the fogged windows, which people draw hearts on in the condensation.

A movement deep inside me, so intimate that it just keeps happening. I breathe in, and I breathe out. My chest rises and falls, 23,000 times a day, in a rhythm that I don't even notice.

Until someone says, pay attention to your breathing. And then suddenly, you can't stop paying attention to your breathing. And you see the power of breath again. Inhale.

Exhale. Expand. Release. In the beginning, we're told God breathed life into humanity, life into the world. And the dust which made the world breathe back enough oxygen, water, and carbon dioxide to make an entire atmosphere, to make human beings.

[5 : 03] Job knew life as the breath of God in my nostrils, which was given and taken away. With breath, the creator, we're told, kindled the stars, parted a sea, woke a valley of dry bones, and inspired a sacred text.

So if the Spirit is as near as our nose, and as deep inside us as our lungs, and as in everywhere, in the air, then what can it possibly mean to come to something that is the Spirit, which is breath, which is already so close to us, already such a huge part of our lives?

More than that, like Matt said last week, God isn't just there close to you. God is, in fact, chasing after you. Even when the world or fear or sin takes over, God doesn't give up.

God is perhaps in this more like the wind, which you can never escape from. Chasing you, constantly turning towards you, even when you try and turn away from God. Here, I think the Spirit is like the wind, which has no limits, which can chase you anywhere and everywhere, which cannot be shut off.

And I guess that is a comfort. It's a comfort because no matter where you are, you can be sure that God is with you. Even if at that moment you think, I don't really want God to be here.

[6 : 20] Even if you can't feel or see God, God is there with you. And sometimes it is easy to get in your own way, to convince yourself that you are the answer to your problems, that you've just got it, that you don't need to pay any attention to anyone, that you can just cut off God and live in the anxiety of the moment or even just wallow.

Just like morning people sometimes cut off close friends and family and spend time sitting in the grief, it can be possible to sit in your fears and pain and anxiety and just busyness.

And sometimes that's not a bad thing. As someone who has been grieving, you can't really understand the extent of your pain or fear or anxiety unless you spend some time feeling it.

And feeling it isn't very easy to do in community. You can't move on without working out the limits of your grief or where it sits in your life. But then, when you're ready, when you've felt your pain, when you've sat in it for a while, you can turn to God.

God who, as Jesus Christ, was born and died, passing through hell, through the waters of death. God who understands pain and grief and despair in the rawest forms from God's life on earth.

[7 : 42] And that same God wasn't ever conquered by death, but rose again through the waters of death to new life. And that is the same God, the Holy Spirit, who can lead us to resurrection in our own lives.

I know from my own experiences, pain can take a while to process. It doesn't just disappear. But perhaps it loses its edge. And as life becomes bigger around the pain, around the grief, as life grows, the pain takes up less space.

And slowly it fades into the background. A bit like panting breaths after a run. They gradually become more normal, less pressured, less anxious. So when Jesus says, come to me, I think perhaps what he's saying is, remember that I am already there.

And when you're ready, give up the thing that you're holding. When you're ready, offer it to me. And I am there, willing to take it. Then Jesus goes on to say, take my yoke.

What does that mean? When you picture putting on a yoke, you imagine that you'll be putting on a heavy burden. And when you're talking about already being burdened, the idea of picking up an additional burden, that seems difficult.

[8 : 57] But Jesus promises that the yoke is light. Now, in most cultures, cattle were yoked in pairs. So probably what Jesus is describing is you being yoked beside Christ.

Pulling in the same direction, taking the same weight. Though probably carrying much less of it. Taking the direction of Christ and moving in the direction of the kingdom of God.

In many ways, receiving direction can be comforting. Comforting because it gives you purpose. It allows you not to just be carried by the tide of what everyone else is doing.

I find when I have purpose, I can look at myself in the mirror and I can feel proud of myself.

Whereas lack of purpose, lack of feeling that you're doing something worthwhile with your life.

Sometimes that can cause burnout and it's all on its own. You don't need to be working too hard to burn out. Sometimes your work can just be deeply unsatisfying and depressing.

[9 : 54] Being led to reach out with love, as God does, and to seek to build a more just and equal world, as we were just praying that Luca may, as God does, that can be enough to comfort you in a meaningful way.

Because acting with love, acting with real kindness, has a real effect on your nervous system, on your mood, on your sense of self.

So it can be sometimes the answer when you're feeling completely beyond comfort is that what you need is something to get up in the morning for. And that is something that I sometimes feel.

In fact, there was one summer where I had nothing to do. And I remember James calling my sister in a state of anxiety. He was like, but if she has nothing to do, she might fall apart.

Which isn't perhaps the healthiest way to be. But I do think purpose helps when you're dealing with the deepest and rawest emotions. Jesus also says, learn for me.

[10 : 54] And when he says that, I don't think he meant studying and remembering everything he said. For me, learning for Jesus has a deeper underlying meaning. I think when we talk about being born again, I think that it's that kind of holistic learning from Jesus that's really important.

Because sometimes, sometimes in the Bible, sometimes when I picture it, the Holy Spirit is like a womb. A womb from which the living are born again. We emerge with our lashes still wet from the water and our eyes unadjusted to the world and the light into a freshly reanimated, recharged world. So many new things to see. So many gifts to receive. So many miracles to baffle and amaze if we only pay attention. If we only let the Spirit surprise us and let God catch our breath.

So what do we learn being nurtured and fed by God in the process of being born again? I guess being born of the Spirit is like being realigned to the love of God.

It's a bit like, because I think when we live in the world, some of the things that are really unjust and terrible, they just become normal. We kind of walk along and we think, it's okay that there are people working in sweatshops buying cheap clothes because that's kind of how it is and there's nothing I can do about it.

[12 : 11] It's okay to see that person treating that other person badly because there's nothing I can do about it. It's okay that we know people who end up alone in their communities because there's nothing we can do about it.

And we kind of become inoculated to all of the injustice out there. We fail to see the racism when it happens. We let someone say a nasty thing about women in our group and we just don't quite challenge it.

And I think when we talk about being born again, God gives us the chance to look at the world with new eyes again and you see all those things and you think, oh, that's terrible. A bit like, you know, in the stories of the Buddha, where Buddha leaves this perfect world and he goes out into the street and discovers that there's poverty for the first time and it's shocking to him.

So for me, when I picture being born again, I picture having eyes that aren't used to all of the small injustices of the world that build up. Eyes that aren't used to people learning their place and not standing up for what's right.

Eyes that aren't used to some of the things that hold people back and hurt them. And I think in all of these things, there is some comfort. Some comfort that comes from those words, come to me, take my yoke, learn from me.

[13 : 25] And that's comfort. Comfort from knowing that God is close. Comfort from knowing that you just need to turn around and say, okay, fine, come in. And God will hammer down the doors of your heart.

Comfort from knowing that God has purpose and is seeking to make the world a better place. And also comfort sometimes from knowing that when you feel that things are a bit off, they are deeply off and somehow people have just got good at ignoring that.

But there is this better world, this stunningly beautiful world that God breathed into being. And we're all invited to be a part of that, to build the kingdom of God on earth. And there is comfort in that too.

Amen.