

Mothering Sunday 2021
The Comfort and Consolation of God
2 Corinthians 1:3-7

I am sure that we are all aware of the origins of Mothering Sunday, that it was originally about the Mother Church generally and specifically a day to return if possible, to your Mother Church, the one which nurtured you as you grew up in faith. It has of course been hijacked by the commercial American idea of Mothers' Day and became for many years a day when we celebrated Mothers. Not a bad thing to do per se, but hopefully these days, whilst still recognising the significant role of Mothers, we understand that there may be many different people in our lives, possibly male and female who have nurtured and mothered us. It is also important to remember today all those for whom the idea of Mothers' Day is sad or painful. Those whose mothers have died, or whose mothers did not love and nurture them as they should have. Those who are struggling to become mothers or have had to accept that they never will and of course those who have suffered the loss of a child. Today I am going to focus on the fact that we can receive the ultimate, love, nurture, and comfort from God.

We have until recent times identified certain characteristics to mothers and different ones to fathers. This is natural, given that in most cases the majority of physical care giving is done by mothers, they are after all designed to be able to provide nutrition for a baby for many months and usually need to be close to the infant most of the time. But hopefully we have realised that when it comes to compassion, nurture, comfort, emotional support and practical care giving, men can be equally well equipped if allowed and encouraged to. Our Granddaughters have certainly benefited from having both their mother and their father be their main care giver at different times.

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We call God our Father and of course he is but He is also our Mother. If that statement makes you feel uncomfortable, I wonder why? I remember a group of about 5 men at my Vicar school cornering me one day and asking me, how exactly is God a Mother? They were conservative evangelicals who believe that it is not biblical for a woman to lead a church (or anything except a group for women or children). I must admit I was a bit stunned and actually felt quite threatened, which rendered me unable to give them any kind of answer. We have to understand that both the Jewish and Christian faith were conceived in quite extreme patriarchal societies. Unsurprisingly as most, although by all means not all, societies have and continue to be patriarchal, led mainly by men.

Jesus was entirely revolutionary in the way that He treated women as equals. The other important fact is that God is Spirit, and in fact neither male or female but both. When God made people, He created them male and female in His likeness. But male and female characteristics are not separate sides of God, God is perfect and a perfectly integrated Spiritual being. Both men and women reflect God's Glory. I am not saying that there are no differences between men and women, but that every person in their own way is capable of loving, nurturing and comforting others. Our passage today explains this really well and doesn't distinguish between male and female.

I have to make a disclaimer now. This passage is written specifically about the comfort and consolation that God gives to those who are suffering as a direct result of being Christians and some people believe that this text should not be taken to mean anything else. I disagree, I think that what Paul says here reflects other passages that are about suffering generally and that we can

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understand God's compassion and comfort for us generally through what He says.

This is a slight aside from our main theme, but the passage opens with Paul using a Christianised version of a Jewish prayer. Those who attended synagogue at this time would pray, "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers." Paul reshapes this prayer and says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." He is making an important theological point to the Corinthians here which I am not going to unpick now but the emphasis is that God is to us the Father of Jesus and our Father. Paul goes on....."the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God". Oh, my goodness there is so much to reflect on here.

God is both the source of all compassion and the God of all comfort. For the Corinthians, steeped in the Old Testament, there would have been a reminder of God's call to Isaiah to, "comfort, comfort my people". And it also calls to mind a picture of motherly tenderness in God's words spoken through Isaiah, "As a mother comforts her children, so I will comfort you." As Paul Barnett says, "If God is the source of mercy and comfort, Christ is the channel through whom these things come to us." We seek God's comfort and compassion in the name of Jesus. It is because of our faith in Him that we have been given the right to be called children of God, as we are told at the beginning of John. And as His children, through Jesus, we can expect His comfort and compassion.

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Verse 5 says that it is through Christ that our comfort is abundant, or overflows. These verses remind us again that we are united both with Christ and with one another, and so as we receive this abundant comfort, compassion and mercy from God through Jesus, so it must overflow enabling us to comfort and console each other in our suffering, and that must even overflow to others who don't yet know Jesus. Remember how He looked at both the crowds and individuals and was full of compassion for them.

Paul does not wrestle with the question of suffering. It is a given, in this life we will have troubles and we will suffer. When we suffer, our loving parent God suffers with us, just as any parent suffers with their child. We can only receive His comfort in our suffering if we both ask for it through Jesus, and are prepared to receive it, and then to share it with others. Any Grace that we receive from God, any gift that is meant to be shared, if we clutch it to ourselves, it will wither and die. That is the danger of focussing too much on ourselves and not enough on the needs of others. Don't get me wrong, we have to receive before we can give. We have to put our own oxygen mask on first if you like - but having received we must share. Our goal in life must be to become more like Jesus, who is just like God. We do this through the power of the Holy Spirit, who is just like Jesus. Father, Son and Spirit united in love, compassion and mercy which overflows in motherly, fatherly, parental love, compassion, mercy and consolation to us His precious children. We receive from Him such abundance that we are empowered to extend that love, compassion, mercy and consolation to everyone who crosses our paths or who is laid on our hearts.