

27th July 2021

Comfort

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.”

Bible, Isaiah 40:1

When I worked as a hospice chaplain, the word “comfort” was heard regularly. The ambience of the building, the attentiveness of the staff and the all-prevailing attitude of love and concern, all served to elicit responses such as, “Your comfort means such a lot to me.” There was, however, a problem with the idea of comfort, and it had its roots in the belief that, in the face of death and distress, comfort didn’t seem enough.

Human nature being what it is, we have a deep desire to make things better, to fix things, to see people restored to wholeness in one way or another, and to feel good about doing so. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s innate to the human condition, to want to make pain go away. After all, this is what we would want too. But when we can’t do that for others, we can feel we’ve failed them. When a terminal illness can’t be “cured” regardless of advances in detection and treatment; when a grieving widow is still distressed despite our best efforts; when someone’s anger isn’t dissipated by our attempts to help, we feel helpless. “All I could offer was comfort,” we cry, as if it was a pathetic, and fruitless, last resort.

But think on this ... The word “comfort” comes from the Latin, *confortare*, “to strengthen much”, and the root of this is in *cum*, meaning “with” and *fortis*, meaning “strength”. So, far from “comfort” being a meagre contribution to a person’s welfare when all other avenues of betterment have been exhausted, to give comfort is to give something with purpose, to offer strength even in your uselessness and wordlessness.

If a child in your care falls and grazes their knee, can you make it better? Do you explain why they feel sore? Do you lecture them about being careful? Do you expound on a theology of suffering? Of course not. You gather the child up and offer comfort, and in your loving arms you hold, you help, you heal, as strength is given and received.

Never underestimate the importance of your comfort. This is no last resort but can be the strong front-line of our care for each other.

A prayer for today

*Lord, if I know your comfort when I suffer,
give me the strength to pass it on when others are suffering too. Amen.*