

'Comfortable words'. Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 6th July 2008

'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.' This may seem an odd way to start a sermon. For one thing, church pews are not usually the most comfortable of seats. Many of us would choose an armchair if we are looking for comfort. It strikes me, however, that whenever Jesus seeks to communicate with us, there is a sense in which our comfort is his key concern. These words: 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin' may not ring any bells with you. But for me, they carry enormous psychological significance. Every weekday as a very young child, I heard these words. Before I was old enough to go to school, I would sit on my mother's lap to hear a radio programme called: 'Listen with mother'. This programme was broadcast by BBC Radio from 1950-82. Having being born in 1951, I got to hear some of its first few years, when the presenter was one Daphne Oxenford, a presenter with a beautifully comforting voice. This programme was broadcast every weekday at 1.45 and it comprised songs, nursery rhymes and, best of all, stories for children under 5 and their mothers. So, I would sit on my mother's lap and hear Daphne Oxenford say in her reassuring tones: 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin' and my mummy and I would enjoy the story. Even if you weren't brought up listening to BBC Radio, you might possibly have come across the famous opening line as others have borrowed it since, including writers of various pop songs on both sides of the Atlantic, including the Moody Blues who in 1969 had a number entitled: 'Are you sitting comfortably?' So I ask you, 'Are you sitting comfortably?' Are you ready to hear what Jesus says to you?

I remember also as a slightly older child coming across the word 'comfortable' being used in a slightly different way. The meaning of 'comfortable' was then giving comfort not so much in a physical sense as in the emotional sense of feeling strong and secure. Literally 'to comfort' means 'to put strength into' and it is for this reason that we refer to the Holy Spirit as 'the comforter'. The Holy Spirit, promises Jesus, will give us strength and hope. For nearly 450 years the worship books of various denominations provide us with four biblical texts for use just before or just after the Confession in our services of Holy Communion. All of these four texts are designed to 'comfort' in the sense of 'giving strength'. Because of this, they are known as the comfortable words. Generation after generation of worshipping Christians have drawn strength from these so-called 'comfortable words'. If you look in your bulletin for this morning, you will see one of these four texts. If you look again at the prayer of confession, you will see that, as usual we followed it with a period of silence giving us time to reflect on what we have confessed. Then comes the crucial assurance of pardon. Without it we may be paralyzed by a sense of what we've got wrong.

On Friday, we have celebrated Independence Day. So this morning, our hymns center on the greatest gift of this nation, the gift of liberty or freedom. What is it that stops us from experiencing the freedom of living we so much crave? It is often not other people or our circumstances so much as ourselves, in particular, one of a variety of crippling emotions. The emotion might be anger. It might be resentment. It might be guilt – the feeling that weighs us down with our past mistakes, of not being worthy. This is why after our prayer on confession and our time of silence, the liturgist then declares to us the assurance of pardon. We don't turn up to worship, and especially to the celebration of Holy Communion, asking, is God in a

mood to forgive us today? We know, yes we know, that provided we are genuinely sorry for what we've got wrong, then God will forgive us. He will forgive us always and without reserve. So, in today's assurance of pardon, Tim/Chris used the ancient liturgical formula, followed by one of the four texts known as the comfortable words: 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' The source of these words is the gospel passage for this morning. In the translation we heard this morning, they appear as: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.' They are followed by the equally inspiring words: 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from 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.' (Mt 11:28-30)

What is Jesus promising us here and how are they comfortable words? I think there are four things here. We might call them the four great 'somethings'. They are something to do; something to leave; something to take; and something to find.

Firstly, Jesus' comfortable words tell us 'something to do'. One of the most debilitating emotions is that of helplessness. We know that somebody needs help but there is absolutely nothing we can do. Sometimes, I am the one in need of help but I am overcome by a feeling of helplessness. Jesus says: 'There is always something you can do. Simply, come to me.' Henri Nouwen said that the gospel in a nutshell was God in Jesus saying to the world: 'Come close.' Note that this 'to do' is not to something or to somewhere but to someone. 'Come to me'. We talk about someone being there for us. We say appreciatively of a friend when we are in particular distress, 'She is there for me. When it comes to Jesus, he is always there for us. There is no time when he withdraws. He is simply available. All we have to do to realize this is to come to him. This often means turning away from all the other sources of our comfort. We may have to change our direction from where we were headed before Jesus called us to where he is now.

Secondly, Jesus's comfortable words tell us 'something to leave'. What is it we have to be prepared to leave at his feet? It is whatever is constituting our present burden. It can be very difficult for us to do that, especially when we feel all the weight of having to figure things out and of managing everything. Jesus asks us to lay down this burden of control, of having to 'be God'. Who is Jesus inviting here? It is 'all that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens.' Who are they? In the original setting they would include those wearied by the burdens placed on them by religious leaders who, as he says on another occasion, 'tie up heavy loads and put them on mean shoulders' (Mt 23:4). We may think particularly of the scribes and Pharisees. The yoke of the law, the Torah, could be oppressive. But surely Jesus' invitation includes all of us. All of us are susceptible to feeling burdened by the oppressive demands of the religious establishment. In place of being weighed down by feelings of 'ought' and 'should' that we can never fully satisfy, Jesus urges us to come to him and lay this guilt, this regret, this anger, this resentment about whatever it is at his feet.

Thirdly, Jesus's comfortable words tell us 'something to take'. In place of the heavy burden we have been staggering around with, we are to take his yoke. Now this still sounds pretty heavy to me, a yoke. But Jesus assures us that his yoke is easy and his burden light. How can this be? Think about the image that Jesus is using here, that of a yoke. A yoke harnesses two

animals together as an allied force, thus making the heaviest burdens possible to bear. The Jewish rabbis spoke of the yoke of the Torah, the yoke of obedience. The yoke that Jesus offers is still the yoke of obedience but it is one that fits us comfortably. It fits easily and is comfortable and easy to wear because it fits human beings created for fellowship with God and with one another. It is the yoke of love and, as such, it is a gentle yoke, not burdensome or wearying, but light, easy, pleasant. Yoked to God in Jesus, we can live as God intended. This yoke of unconditional love enables us to perform our tasks as human beings. All we have to do is take this yoke upon us.

Fourthly, Jesus's comfortable words tell us 'something to find.' Twice in our gospel reading this morning Jesus speaks of 'rest'. By taking his yoke upon us we will find the rest that he gives. This is not the passive rest of going to sleep. It is the active rest of trusting, of trusting God completely for the outcomes. We can be at rest when we learn from Jesus to walk the ancient paths. The Old Testament links such rest with meekness, gentleness, forgiveness, and humility. Above all, promised rest is associated with God's presence. So God promises in Exodus 33:14 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' Jesus lived with perfect knowledge of God and perfect submission to his loving purpose. He was both the presence of God and the interpreter and fulfiller of God's commandments. So Jesus is still. 'Hence those who come to Jesus experience the rest promised to those who live in God's presence and walk in his ways. This rest in Christ is the beginning of the promised eternal Sabbath rest for the people of God (Heb 4:3-11)'.¹ The prophet Isaiah says: 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.' (Isaiah 30:15) The strained, competitive, hurried obedience that religion can sometimes seem to impose is not what we find in Jesus. This obedience is easy, it rest-producing, because there is nothing one can do to earn it – or to lose it. It is the pure gift of God's grace that can only be freely received, and, in turn, freely given.

'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.' I was myself recently reminded of this childhood experience of being read a story whilst snuggling up to my mother. Our recent vacation began with visiting son Lenny, daughter-in-law Tonia, and grandson, River. Also present were daughter, Meredith. Now this was only the 3rd set of two/three days that River had spent with his Aunt Meredith in his 18 months of life, but each time he sees her he seems completely at ease with her. He is confident and secure. He wants to be close to her and most of all, in this most recent family gathering, he wanted her to read him a story – again and again and again. For both Stephen and me, it was lovely to watch River snuggle up to Meredith so that he was truly comfortable and she could read to him. The words Meredith gave to River were, indeed, comfortable in all respects. At ease in her presence, he could take strength from what he heard. There is, indeed, a sense in which whenever Jesus addresses us, he says: 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.' If we are at rest in his presence, if we have handed over to him our heavy burdens, if we have submitted to his comfortable yoke, then he can live in us and through us. He can speak to us continuously, giving us his strength. As we come to Holy Communion this morning, Jesus says: 'Come close.' As we rise each day this week, Jesus says 'Come close.' As we lie down to sleep each day this week, Jesus says: 'Come close.' And in each moment in between, Jesus says: 'Come close.'

¹ David E Holwerda in *The Lectionary Commentary*, vol. 3, edit Roger E Van Harn (2001), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p 71