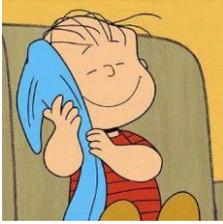


Introduction

Did you or perhaps your children have a comfort blanket? Who or what do you turn to for comfort?



No doubt in thinking about this, you have probably come up with a variety of answers. Perhaps you thought about arriving home from work and changing into clothes in which you feel more relaxed. Maybe you thought of returning from holiday and putting the kettle on for a good cup of your own tea, or a comfortable night's sleep in your own bed. Or sometimes it can be food which gives us comfort - a plate of 'mince and tatties' or sausage, beans and a baked potato - a bar of chocolate for the sweet-toothed among us - Cadbury's, of course! For some people comfort comes from listening to a favourite piece of music, reading their Bible or praying.

Whatever it might be, comfort is usually found in something familiar, something known, something which gives a sense of security - just as the child carries round a favourite toy, which has a familiar look and smell, just as we hopefully feel safe and secure in our own spaces. But we can't always live in our comfort zones, sometimes we need to go out and test the water, dip our toes in to see how cold it might be and take the challenge of plunging into the unknown. We can't learn to swim until we take our feet off the bottom; we can't ride a bicycle without lifting our feet from the floor to the pedals. At the moment, comfort is found in the security of our own homes, in the company of those closest to us. The world outside is full of unknowns - will we be safe? will we encounter too many people? will the virus be waiting just for us? At some point we shall need to step beyond our front doors back into a different world, one that may challenge us and scare us - yet we shall need to let go of our comfort blankets and move forward. So it is with our faith - sometimes we need to let go and believe.

Readings: 1 Kings 19: 9 - 18
Matthew 14: 22 - 33

Hymn: Eternal Father, strong to save (Tune - Melita)

1 Eternal Father, strong to save,
your arm commands the restless wave.
You tell the mighty ocean deep
within its bounds and shores to keep.
O hear us when we call to you
and strengthen us in all we do.

2 O Saviour, when your voice is heard,
the winds and waves obey your word.
With confidence you walk the seas,
your calm and constance never cease.
O hear us when we call to you,
encourage us in all we do.

3 O gentle Spirit, with your breath,
you fill us with such tenderness.
Through quake and fire and gusty winds,
you guard and guide us, hearts and minds.
O hear us when we call to you,
enable us in all we do.

4 O Trinity of love and might
sustain us through the days and nights.
Through trials and troubles, doubts and fears,
renew our faith throughout the years.
O hear us when we call to you,
equip us to give all for you.

William Whiting (1825-78) altd. Adapted: E. Plews 2020

Reflection

I guess we all have favourite Bible stories which comfort us as much as a blanket or warming cup of tea. The stories in our readings today are well known and have inspired artists to paint and hymn writers to write! Elijah is in hiding. He was having a 'stop the world and let me alone' moment - afraid for his life. A prophet

unable to do his work for fear. God's challenge at first is simple - "What are you doing here?" Elijah's answer of 'hiding' doesn't really work, does it? He could no more hide from God than we can. There is wind, earthquake and fire in Horeb (another name for Sinai), just as there was for Moses and the Israelites. Then God spoke in the still small voice of calm. "Elijah, what are you doing HERE?" God reminds Elijah that there is work to be done. He is not alone and that God is sending him to the 70,000 who are waiting for him.

There is a role for us to play 'out there'; God would like to send us to the role that is waiting for us. What are we doing here?

Peter is impetuous and brave. His impetuosity and bravery get him into scrapes and bother! He is brave, then hesitant. He recognises Jesus, wants to go to Him, ploughs in and on, then doubts and flounders. His love for Jesus inspired him, but his faith wasn't strong enough to uphold him.

How can we deepen our faith to persevere with the things our love of Jesus inspires us to do?

Elijah and Peter, with the disciples, learnt something about the nature of God. God cared for them just as we learn that God cares for us. Regardless of the turmoil: the wind, earthquakes, fire or storms; the isolation, the grief and the worry - it will pass. God will be heard; God is there; God cares and rescues again and again. Peter and the disciples learnt of the divinity of Jesus - in calming their fear of the storm and the storm of their fears, Jesus showed himself as truly the Son of God.

From Elijah's place of pain and worry, from Peter's place of fear for his life, it was possible to learn more about God. Elijah only got to that place by boldly doing God's work - and upsetting his enemies. Peter only got to that place by stepping out of the boat to draw nearer to Jesus. Perhaps we need to leave the safe and secure and comfortable sometimes. We need to go to the risky or uncertain places if we are to learn more about God.

Elijah was a faithful, if human prophet. God continued to have work for him and to send him to those who needed to hear his message, God's message. Peter was an enthusiastic follower - he left his fishing nets behind when Jesus said, "Follow me"; he left the boat when Jesus said, "Come." God cared for them and rescued them, again and again.

God cares for us as we walk this earthly path with its scary moments, its dangerous places, its folk who seem hostile and its times of grief and pain. But God also calls us from where we are to where we are needed and where we are meant to be - and will strengthen and protect us and rescue us again and again when we struggle. Our Church buildings and activities have been and are of great importance and comfort to us. Being unable to meet in those buildings and share those activities is painful. God is calling or whispering; we need to listen carefully to discern what we must work for and plan to preserve and what we should allow to pass as we move forward.

Our Church families are a support and enrichment for us. When one is hurting, ill or bereaved, we share a little bit or a big part of that trial. We must work and strive to support one another as we move forward in these changing times and as we step out in faith. There is nothing wrong with wearing arm bands, but one day they get put to one side when we learn to swim. The comfort blanket and the bands can be remembered with affection, but they become part of 'then' rather than part of 'now'.

There is nothing wrong with being in our comfort zone. It gives space to recover, to grow and to strengthen. But life has many zones and sometimes we need to leave the comfort zone if we are to hear or see God more clearly. Events, friends, colleagues, church family and birth family may be the catalysts for nudging us out, encouraging us to venture forth from where we are. It is faith in God and in God's love for us that will draw us forward. Even when we are unsure of what we are stepping into, it is the care and love of God which will sustain and rescue us - again and again - in times of fear. Let us step gently, but boldly in faith, from where we are to where God is calling us.

Amen

Prayers

Calling God, we bring to You now our prayers for the people and the places we love and care about, for the events and situations which worry and concern us, and we lay them down to ease our burden. We lay them down to focus and to listen for how You would have us respond, and we prepare to pick them up and to hold them in our hearts and in our living this week.

Hear us when we call to You, **equip us to give all for You.**

We pray especially for those who face difficult situations and make difficult decisions each day; for our key workers, emergency services, planners and volunteers. May they be well equipped for their tasks and know kindness and support. Strengthen us to reach out to them where we can.

Hear us when we call to You, **equip us to give all for You.**

We pray especially for those who work in challenging areas in your service; for Chaplains and Ministers, for aid workers and peacekeepers. May they know Your loving protection. Strengthen us to offer support through prayer, friendship and through donations where we can.

Hear us when we call to You, **equip us to give all for You.**

We pray especially for those who are in pain, through illness, grief, separation, fear or confusion. May they know Your care and the healing which You bring. Strengthen us to include, to walk alongside and to befriend.

Hear us when we call to You, **equip us to give all for You.**

We pray especially for ourselves and our church families. May we be close in prayer and fellowship, bold in our living for You and our walking the way of Jesus.

Hear us when we call to You, **equip us to give all for You.**

Loving God, you call us as your people. We respond to your call as one body. We remember today all those who are in pain or torment as a result of the pandemic: those who are ill, bereaved, isolated or confused. May they know your constant presence.

We pray especially for all those affected by the tragic events in Beirut. We can only imagine the extent of the horror, terror and abandonment they are experiencing. May they be aware of your presence, know the love and care of friends, the support of caring agencies and the hope which you can bring to every one of your children.

We bring our prayers in Jesus' name, knowing He has walked this earthly path and knowing we are called to follow in faith. In Jesus' name, Amen

Our offering to God

As we continue to worship apart but together, let us pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church by continuing to send our offering and exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know God's blessing on all we do. Amen

Hymn: Lord, speak to me, that I may speak (Tune - Fulda)

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|---|---|
| 1 Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
In living echoes of thy tone;
As thou hast sought, so let me seek
Thy straying children lost and lone. | 2 O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
The wandering and the wavering feet;
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed
Thy hungering ones with manna sweet. |
| 3 O strengthen me, that, while I stand
Firm on the rock, and strong in thee,
I may stretch out a loving hand
To wrestlers with the troubled sea. | 4 O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
The precious things thou dost impart;
And wing my words, that they may reach
The hidden depths of many a heart. |
| 5 O fill me with thy fullness, Lord,
Until my very heart o'erflow
In kindling thought and glowing word,
Thy love to tell, thy praise to show. | 6 O use me, Lord, use even me,
Just as thou wilt, and when, and where,
Until thy blessed face I see,
Thy rest, thy joy, thy glory share. |

Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879)

Blessing

We go from this place as people of God to live and to work and to walk in the way of Jesus.
We are called and we follow; we are equipped and cared for.
As we go from this place, God is with us and blesses us each step of the way. Amen



(ROOTS for Churches Limited)