

Notes for St. Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians

Comforted to Comfort (2 Cor. 1:1-7)

Behind this passage is a summary of the Christian life.

Paul writes as a man who knows trouble to those are in trouble. Sometimes there falls upon a man's spirit the burden and the mystery of this unintelligible world. In the early years of Christianity (perhaps even now) the man who chose to become a Christian chose to face trouble. Here might well come to him abandonment by his own family, hostility from his heathen (non-Christian or non-episcopalian) neighbors, and persecution from the official powers.

The answer to this suffering lies in endurance. The Greek word for endurance is not grim, bleak acceptance of trouble but triumph. It describes the spirit which can not only accept suffering but triumph over it.

But we are not left to face this trial by ourselves and to provide the endurance alone. There comes to us the comfort of God. The word comfort (between vs. 3 -7) appears 9 times and in the New Testament, always means more than soothing sympathy. Its root meaning (Latin: fortis) means brave. Christian comfort brings courage and enables a man to cope with all that life can do to him. Paul was sure that God never sends a man a vision without the power to work it out and never sends him a task without the strength to do it.

Apart from that, there is always a certain inspiration in any suffering which a person's Christianity may incur, for as Paul puts it, it is a sharing in the suffering of Christ.

The supreme result of all this is that we gain the power to comfort others who are going through it. Paul claims that the things which happened to him and the comfort which he has received, has made him able to be a source of comfort to others. It is worthwhile experiencing suffering and sorrow if that experience will enable us to help others struggling with life's billows.

Have we face "trouble" because of our Christianity/religion? Have we felt/experienced the "endurance" of "The Spirit" as Paul describes it? Have we had times when we DID NOT feel it? Do you care to share these? Have we received and/or gave the "comfort" that he speaks of? Have we received or been a source of this Christian "comfort?" Where can we be instruments of comfort to others in our specific lives? Are you helping in the "Neighborhood Links" at Advent?

Driven Back On God (2 Cor. 1:8-11)

The most extraordinary thing about this passage is that we have no information at all about this terrible experience which Paul went through at Ephesus. Something happened to him which was almost beyond bearing. He was in such danger that he believed that a sentence of death had been passed on him and there was no escape, yet beyond this passing reference (and some others like it) we have no account of what happened.

There is a human tendency to make the most of anything that we have to go through. Often a person who has undergone a simple operation will make it a subject of conversation for a long time to come. People who have really suffered, usually do not talk about it very much. Paul made no parade of his sufferings, and we who have so much less to suffer should follow his example.

But Paul saw that the terrifying experience he had gone through had one tremendous use - it had driven him back to God and demonstrated to him his utter dependence on him. For every one prayer that rises to God in days of prosperity, ten thousand rise in days of adversity. Abe Lincoln said "I have often been driven to my knees in prayer, because I had nowhere else to go." It is often in times of trouble that a man finds out who are his true friends, and it often needs some time of adversity to show us how much we need God.

The outcome was that Paul had an unshakable confidence in God. He knew now beyond all argument what He could do for him. If God could bring him through that, he could bring him through anything. The confidence of the Christian in God is not a thing of theory and speculation: it is a thing of fact and experience. He know what God has done for him and therefore he is not afraid.

Finally, Paul asks for the prayers of the Corinthians. The greatest of the saints is not ashamed to ask for the prayers of the least of the brethren. We may have very little to give our friends; but, however little we have of this world's goods, we can give them the priceless treasure of our prayers.

I'm sure we have all experienced times of trouble and times of peace, how do we talk about those "times?" Do we tend to "weight" others down with our troubles? Do we seek to help those who "are in trouble?" Do we ask for/offer our prayers from our friends, neighbors, fellow Christians, non-Christians, enemies, those we do not "like" or those who do harm to us?

Our Only Boast (2 Cor. 1:12-14)

Here we begin to catch the undertones of the accusations that the Corinthians were leveling against Paul and of the slanders with which they were trying to smear on him.

They must have been saying that there was more in Paul's conduct than met the eye. His answer is that he has lived with the holiness and purity of God. There were no hidden actions in Paul's life. Perhaps we could add a new beatitude to the list: "Blessed is the man who has nothing to hide." The word Paul uses for purity may describe something which can bear the test of being held up to the light of the sun and looked at with the sun shining through it. Happy is the man whose every action will hear the light of day and who, like Paul, can claim that there are no hidden actions in his life.

There were those who were attributing hidden motives to Paul. His answer is that his whole conduct is dominated, not by calculating shrewdness, but by the grace of God. There were no hidden motives in Paul's life. Men may never see these motives, but, as St. Thomas Aquinas said, "Man regards the deed but God sees the intention. Purity of actions may be difficult, but purity of motive is still more difficult. Such purity can come to us only when we too can say that our old self has died and Christ lives in us.

There were those who said that Paul in his letters did not quite mean what he said. His answer was that there were no hidden meanings in his words. Words are "odd", - a man may use them to reveal his thoughts or to conceal them. Few of us can honestly say that we mean exactly what we say. We may say

a thing because it is the right thing to say; we may say it for the sake of being agreeable; we may say it for the sake of avoiding trouble.

In Paul's life there were no hidden action, no hidden motives and no hidden meanings. That is something we should aim at.

I'm sure all of us at one time or another have had or felt we had these same allegations against us, How did we react/respond to these? Did this cause us to change our feelings toward these persons? Have we (even just in our thoughts) felt these allegations toward someone else? If there was a yes, or even, a maybe to either of these, what can and should we do to correct it? How does this affect our relationship with God and our fellow men?