

Dear Friends,

The Book of Common Prayer (B.C.P.) translates the Psalmist's words in the Twenty-third Psalm, "He leads me beside the still waters" as "He shall lead me forth beside the waters of comfort." In his poem 'Venus and Adonis,' Shakespeare wrote "Love comforteth like sunshine after rain" (line 799). Such loving refreshing comfort ultimately comes from "the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

Down through the ages, God's people have faced many a dark experience, many have been stripped of all they possessed, yet they proved that there was a love comforting them "like sunshine after rain." They did not faint in the day of adversity but instead gathered strength and courage from the comfort they received from God. When the darkness was dense, they would often speak to themselves those consoling words, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, why are you disquieted within me, hope thou in God for I shall yet praise him who is the health of my countenance and my God" (Psalm 42:11).

In a world so heavy with suffering, pain, grief and disaster, there is not a person who does not need comfort at some time or other. A saying in Virgil's Aeneid reads, "There are tears in the affairs of this life, and human sufferings touches the heart."

So, in response, how does our Lord comfort our souls? Run with the thought of Jesus being our Good Shepherd. There are various ways our Good Shepherd comforts our souls. And he had need be, for the diseases and mischances of a flock of sheep of any size are well-nigh endless as I experienced one spring in Shetland. Here was one going on three legs; here was another who had got its neck twisted in a wire-fence, and when the shepherd came to release it, it got frantic as if he was the butcher before his time. Another had got through a hole in the hedge and could not find its way back again. What a work a shepherd has got: hard, toilsome, anxious, sleepless. It meant all manner of tenderness, of patience, of skill and fortitude on their part or the sheep would never reach the comfort of the fold. If we consult our Bibles, we will discover lists and catalogues of our soul's ailments and misfortunes there. Then you come back to this word with a tenderer feeling: "who comforts us in all our troubles." The Good Shepherd is doing this every day and all day. He does this in myriad ways but here are two.

There are what I call "the refreshing waters of quietude and open-air nature." There is no season of the year in which we may not find this source of comfort for our souls. God's creation can always be our recreation. To have a mind and heart open to the highest impressions of the natural universe, to be able to enter the life of a summer or winter day, to enjoy a night of stars, to feel the beauty of a flower, the grandeur of a storm, the spell of the wide waters or the high mountains is to have abundant means of comfort always near at hand whenever we feel the need of calling ourselves off for awhile from the strain of daily life.

In his journal, Henri Frédéric Amiel (1821–1881) describes a country walk when a dark and troubled mind came upon him, "The sunlight, the green leaves, the sky, all whispered to me, 'Be of good cheer and courage, poor wounded one.'" We are all, at times, poor wounded ones, needing all the comfort we can find. And "what simple joys from simple sources springs."

The quiet ministry of nature is full of renewing grace. Let us make the most of this source of comfort especially in this time of year. We are sent into the world not only to solve its problems, fight its battles, and put away its sin by the sacrifice of ourselves, but to find comfort and rest, and through comfort and rest, the deepening and enlargement of our lives.

Turning briefly from the Book of Nature, we come to the Book of Grace. In the words of Jesus, "Come to me all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). His invitation, so large and sweet and tender, and which needs to be made clear and impressive to each succeeding generation, is an invitation to seek comfort and rest through trust and obedience. In the fellowship of Jesus we lose our ignorant and guilty fears; we find our heavenly Father; we learn to take a gracious view of life, even of its hardest circumstances, and to be at peace with things; we welcome the will of God, and to rejoice in the good of others as if it were our own; we enter into our Saviour's cause and are persuaded that in the body and out of the body we are compassed about by the atmosphere of infinite Love.

What can ultimately comfort the weary soul like these spiritual persuasions, is the great trust and hopes which are the secret of Jesus, and which he communicates to all who put themselves under his influence and seek to live in the communion of his Spirit. To have depth and elevation and tranquillity in life, and the aim kept high and the impulse true and steady, it is absolutely necessary for mind and heart to have constant access to this ultimate source of comfort. And all we needs do is "Come." Prayer and sacrament and providences, "pleasing or painful, dark or bright, as best may seem to him" have their place. But these are only the means; the chief medicine is himself.

Every blessing,

Rev John