

Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent
Sermon from Pastor Konrad Rönnecke
Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

Comfort, to comfort, to be comforted – this is what the epistle is about this Sunday. What is meant by this? What comforts? Who is comforted? Paul uses this word so often that it is worth making an acrostic of the word “comfort” (TROST in German) because the comfort that Paul talks about here is not something we can buy, nor do we carry this comfort around in our pocket like a handkerchief that we can take out when it’s needed or pass it to others. Comfort is something that happens, occurs, takes hold of us, and spreads throughout us. There are 5 letters in the German word for comfort so we will look at 5 words to help us look more deeply at this word “comfort.”

I) Tribulation

The word “tribulation” is rarely used today. The other word that is used here – suffering – is more known to us. But the issue at stake is timeless. People experience bleak times. A veil covers their heart. Doubt and fear spread. Joy is lost. Sorrow comes over the soul. And the reasons are numerous. Paul had many bitter experiences: there were quarrels, power struggles, injuries, malicious accusations, illness, and threats to life and limb. Each of us could fill the word “*tribulation*” with our own experiences. Everyone knows times in which life is darkened. Times in which we recognize that our life is not being lived according to God’s Will. We also experience sin and guilt burdening our life and reigning in this world. Of course, Christ broke the power of sin. But Paul is speaking here of “sharing in Christ’s sufferings.” Our path with Christ is a path through suffering and bleak times. For Christians, there is no way to get around suffering. You don’t seek out places where you can suffer, and you don’t wish it on anyone. But the Bible says: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22) So this is the starting point of all comfort: the experience of tribulation and distress, suffering and affliction – as Christians in a world that doesn’t want to know about Christ. But that’s not all.

II) Willingness to Speak

Whatever is troubling us: a broken friendship, someone’s death, an argument or fear, worry about children, pain, persecution... It’s always comforting when someone is there who doesn’t just ask “How are you?” but really has time to listen and to take care of me. How therapeutic and truly comforting it is when we see, feel, and experience that there is someone who cares about me, who is kind to me, who stands by me, in whom I can confide. In John’s Gospel it says that Jesus Christ is the Word of God which God sent into the world. In other words: God does not hold back. He doesn’t distance Himself. He sends His Son. He comes to us personally, to save us, to comfort us, to heal us. He even gives us Himself as food and drink in Holy Communion. He rests His hand on you for forgiveness and blessing. He is even sitting beside you. He listens to you and speaks to you whenever you fold your hands in prayer and whenever you read the Bible. In this way, God proves Himself to be the “God of all Comfort,” as Paul calls Him.

III) Care

In personal times of crisis, you don’t want to talk to everyone, especially with people who have no understanding but always seem to have a ready answer. Care is therefore needed – mindfulness for those who are not well, who have no more strength, who don’t know what to do, who are helpless. In his letter,

Paul acts with care and caution. In his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, he didn't avoid any arguments, he didn't mince his words. Here, in his second letter, the tone is different. Paul responds carefully and calmly. He doesn't simply ignore the things that put a strain on their relationship with one another, but instead, he opens up. He shows solidarity with the congregation, creates space and seeks to ensure that God has His say, that Christ remains the center. So God Himself becomes the comforter.

IV) Solidarity

The apostle is not simply the great comforter and opposite him stands the congregation that needs to be comforted. On the contrary: both are bound together in suffering. They belong together, are dependent on one another, practice solidarity. We certainly know that too. It's good to have someone by your side who has also experienced difficult times, suffering, and hardship and who shows understanding. It makes you feel less alone. Paul describes such a community here. And he even goes one step further by interpreting this spiritually. For him, the weaknesses, tribulations, and suffering are the place where God's power is demonstrated: "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation." Perhaps this helps and unburdens us: when we must sit together and endure difficulties, when we want to comfort and help but words and strength are lacking – we should know that it is precisely in such moments of powerlessness that God's strength is revealed, when we listen to His Word together and ask for His help. Solidarity in suffering. Jesus also knows about this. He knows the pain of being alone, of scorn, of persecution, of not knowing what to do, of breathing the last breath of a human's life. He placed Himself in suffering so that He could burst it open from within. The Sunday "Laetare" (meaning rejoice) points us to Easter in the middle of Lent. Through Christ, there is a way out of all tribulation. Suffering doesn't shut us in, but we can go through it with Christ and in the end, even through death and resurrection into eternal life – with Christ.

V) Loyalty

I can't find my way out of sorrow, tribulation, and suffering when someone comes by for a moment, pats me on the shoulder, says nice words without bothering to do anything else. Comfort has something to do with "loyalty." In terms of the history of words, comfort is related to the English word, "trust." I can trust someone who turns to me and stays by my side – someone who stays by my side even when it costs him time and strength, even when it is perhaps uncomfortable for him. I can trust the person who puts his words into action. Thanks be to God that there are such trustworthy people. People we can connect with, someone who doesn't desert me, someone I can trust, someone I can rely on. And yet we also know about the limits of loyalty. Who wouldn't want to have more time for others, to pray more faithfully, to be more conscientious, to be more patient. With God it's different. He is so much more reliable than any person could be. He is on your side like Paul writes here: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." Through Christ, who doesn't leave you alone; who has been in your life since your baptism and remains by your side, comforting and strengthening you every day. And we also experience God noticeably leading us out of tribulation, sorrow, and fear. Looking back, we discover that God actually led me out of the depths. He opened the door for me that was so tightly shut. He has given my feet a foundation again that supports me, on which I can stand and build my life.

VI) God comforts us, dear brothers and sisters.

His Comfort: He is with us in Tribulation. He signals a Willingness to Speak. He Cares about how we are. He is in Solidarity with us and remains Loyal to us. Therefore, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. Amen.*