

Sermon: The Beauty of being Needy

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Rev Dr Jos Strengholt

I once had to write a letter to the former Coptic Patriarch, Anba Shenouda III. When I ended that letter wishing that the Lord bless the pope, a Coptic friend rebuked me. 'How dare you! We need him to bless us, so we can not wish him blessings!'

The presupposition of my friend was that those in a role of Christian leadership must bless those whom they serve. The idea that Christian leaders also need the encouraging support of others was inconceivable to him.

Many Christians have this idea that Christian leaders must be strong, and successful; they are never in need themselves. They can expect God to bless them with all they need.

To be a Christian leader and to be sick and poor, depressed, needy, is simply inconceivable in this worldview. If you are a good servant of God, He will bless you with a healthy life and with financial independence and with great inner blessings, will He not?

1 HOW TO RESPOND TO CRITIQUE

The church in Corinth had, it seems, similar expectations of its leaders, and therefore many had turned against the Apostle Paul. A careful reading of II Corinthians reveals some of the critique they harbored against the Apostle:

- He came across as weak because he suffered much;
- He was not a miracle-worker;
- Paul did not come across as wise and powerful in his speaking;
- He had changed his travel plans so he seemed indecisive;
- and, he was also accused of being too uncompromising in his Gospel message.

In our sermons in the coming weeks, we will return to these accusations. For the Apostle Paul, who had founded the church in Corinth a few years earlier, these accusations were of course very painful. He had given them his all, and this is what he got in return?

But Paul's response to the church in Corinth was remarkable. He shows us how we can deal with problems in life, and that includes the problem of people who are critical because you have so many problems.

In his first few verses, 1-2, Paul immediately sets the tone. He knows of the criticism by a vocal minority in the church, but with confidence he reiterates: 'I am an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God.'

What do we do when people criticize us? If this happens to us, and it is likely to happen to anyone of us, then we must not reject what they say out of hand; we must consider carefully what people say, open to listening and changing our ways.

But if we in all honesty and realistically know, that we have done nothing wrong, then like Paul, we must not allow critique to paralyze us or to make us afraid of others.

Paul knew that God had called him to be an apostle; what he was doing was the will of God. He was hurt by the accusations, but he knew his identity in Jesus Christ, and that kept him going.

Now this might easily lead to a rather arrogant attitude toward those critics, but see what Paul says next. In spite of the disagreement he had with them, he calls them Church of God and he calls them saints.

This word 'Church' that Paul uses, is the same term that is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the 'Assembly' of the Lord. That was the formal meeting of the covenant people of Israel.

Just as God dealt with Israel in the Old Testament, He now deals with the New Testament church; together we form the one People of God.

Take note: In spite of his problems with the believers in Corinth, Paul does not question their integrity as People of God. He underlines that in spite of their harsh criticism of him, as a community they are the chosen nation that God has created.

Then, without cynicism, he even calls them saints, holy people, set aside for God.

How can Paul do this? How can he be so gracious to his critics? I think, because he did not doubt his Christian identity; and as a Christian, he modeled his behavior on God and on Jesus Christ – from whom grace and peace flow to the Church in Corinth.

If this is God's generous attitude to us, undeserving sinners, how can we be less gracious to other people – even if they are not particularly pleasant to us?

In verse 11, Paul also writes to those who criticized him for being weak, that he was weak indeed and that he depended on their prayers for him. What a lovely attitude of humility. He does not deny his weakness, his neediness, but he underlines it. 'Yes, I am needy, and I need your prayers.'

To humbly make yourself dependent on the prayers of the very people who also cause you pain... That demands integrity and humility.

2. REAL TROUBLES, REAL PAIN

Paul's request for their prayers shows that he was not prepared to let the Christian community be easily broken because of disagreements. For the maintenance of Christian unity there are many important reasons. One of them is the importance of the united community for those who are needy and who suffer.

If you need help in your situation of stress and tension and hardship, the first thing to do is to not withdraw from the community of Christians, but to ask for their prayers and support. God uses the community of believers to stand with you in your struggles.

This was in complete opposition to the prevalent philosophy in Paul's days, that of Stoicism. Stoicism was about how to live a happy life. If hardship hits you, accept it in a serene manner, Do not let problems hurt your soul. 'Be Stoic about it.'

Christians do not believe in being Stoic, in denying the awfulness of problems, pain and suffering. It is okay to hurt and to cry, and to need people around you to pray for you and to put their arm around your shoulder. Why face problems alone by keeping up appearances.

The apostle speaks in verse 8 about the afflictions he experienced in Asia, that is the Roman province of what is now western Turkey.

We do not know the details, but whatever happened to him, he felt burdened beyond his strength and he says that it felt as if he had received the sentence of death. He was in mortal danger, he thought his end was near, and he felt awful about it. That is why he needed the prayers of the Christian community.

None of us can permanently escape from serious problems and suffering; at one time or another, it will hit you like a train. And it will hurt you.

Oswald Chambers was a Scottish missionary here in Heliopolis during World War I. He was commissioned by YMCA to minister to Australian and New Zealand troops in their barracks in Zeitoun and hospitalized here in the palace at that time. In one of his books, Oswald Chambers wrote:

Suffering is the heritage of the bad, of the penitent, and of the Son of God. Each one ends in the cross. The bad thief is crucified, the penitent thief is crucified, and the Son of God is crucified.

Oswald Chambers died in 1917, at the age of 43, because of a ruptured appendix. He was buried here in Cairo. He left a young wife and a daughter behind. How miserable.

We all face the show of suffering, in one way or another. We face personal disappointments, tragedies, losses, frustrations, problems, in work, in our family.

Even if at times, sometimes for long periods, we do well, we still live in the midst of a worn-out, broken world with poverty, war, terror, street children, pollution.

And there seems to be so little we can do about it. I often feel like a small drop in a big ocean, aware of my limitations, frailty, and vulnerability.

Our society offers a great variety of solutions, mostly focussed on making us forget reality and on numbing our senses. Throw yourself into work or play, stay busy all the time, occupy your mind with movies, television, or video games, why not try alcohol, or go shopping, so that we are not aware of the voice inside of us crying out for comfort.

The super apostles in Corinth had their own solution. A servant of God should always be strong and successful, but if problems come, then live as if these external things do not hurt you. Ignore, train your mind and soul to be serene. Do not get upset, do not be hurt.

But does this solution work for you?

3 REAL COMFORT

The apostle Paul went through hard times of criticism and persecution, and the first thing he starts talking about in his letter, is the comfort that he needs. He did not try to show an image of power and success and serenity.

For Christians, problems and being needy is not something to hide or to be embarrassed about and we should not deny it.

The Apostle calls God, the 'Father of Compassion and the God of all comfort'. Comfort is the middle name of God, it is in His character. God's comfort is a matter of his being, and therefore when he relates to us, he is always comforting.

Our own Egyptian Church father St Origin of Alexandria writes that 'those who share in sufferings will share also in the comfort in proportion to the suffering they share with Christ.' [Exhortation to Martyrdom, chapter 42]

Think of this; if God's character is to comfort, and if our comfort increases when the troubles are bigger, then this means that we get to know God himself better when our troubles increase. He comes closer to us and we to Him.

The danger of an easy life is that it encourages a false independence; it makes us think that we are well able to handle life alone. For every one prayer that rises to God in days of prosperity, ten thousand rise in days of adversity.

That is why Paul says, in verse 9, that he felt as if he had been sentenced to death 'in order to make us rely not on ourselves but on God'. Our neediness makes us escape to God, and we get to know God better. That is great gain.

Paul also argues that he suffered for the benefit of the Corinthian Christians. Because in his suffering he received comfort from God, he in his turn could better comfort the Corinthians.

So to be needy is not all bad - it can be a positive force in your life. We come closer to Him in times of need, and in this process he comforts us by his presence. And thus he makes us better people - we become better friends with more empathy for others in their need.

So to be suffering on the inside and the outside, to be needy, does not disqualify you from being a real servant of God. On the contrary. They are the precondition for serving God.

If in our times of need we do not learn to lean on God and to find our comfort in him, then the real tragedy is that we have wasted an opportunity to get to know God better, to depend more on him, and to be better people for others.

CONCLUSION

So, to conclude - If God allows hardship in your life, do not miss the opportunity to learn; no, we do not have to like our problems, not at all. But we have to live with them, so better make the best of it: God uses our misery to draw us closer to himself; He uses problems to teach us to depend more on him.

We get to know him better through problems, because of the comfort he gives to us. Through his comfort we meet with God himself. He does not poor comfort on us like from a bottle. He himself is the Father of all comfort and he comes so close to us in our need. He comforts us through his embrace.

We also become better people through the ups and downs of life, as we will be better able to speak of God, and we become his comfort also to other people.

So our problems are not a sign that God has left us; they are not a sign that we are not truly servants of God. The opposite is true. They are the means by which we come closer to God, and through which we become better servants of him.

So do not be ashamed of being needy and weak; if your neediness moves you to God, it is pure gain. **Amen**