

COMFORTING WORDS FROM OUR SAVIOUR

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I recently had the opportunity to sit and listen to the Reverend Canon Dr Ashley Null, who currently holds a research post funded by the German Research Council at Humboldt University of Berlin and a visiting fellow at Cambridge University and Durham University.

The combination of the Rev. Dr. Null's knowledge and passion was invigorating. This was especially evident as he stepped through the four scripture quotes in the Book of Common Prayer, Holy Communion Service.

In what follows I am drawing heavily on Ashley Null's comments, with a few of my own reflections added in:

Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

Having made their confession of sin, the earnestly repentant are brought comfort from their bishop or priest in the words of the absolution. So as to reinforce that their Savior brings a sufficient word of comfort to the penitent, we hear these words of Jesus from in Matthew 11:28.

These words are an invitation that weary and worn hearts may come to the living water for refreshment. Jesus knows the burden that we carry, and he knows our desire for rest.

This quotation expresses the neediness of the human heart in conjunction with the Saviour's generous offer to meet that need. We notice that God makes the first move, in offering refreshment, and also that God knows our deep need – and perhaps more clearly than we do ourselves.

So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Where the first comforting word was about the desires of the needy, human heart, then the second comforting word is about the desire of God's heart.

This is self-revelation, in which God speaks of the inner workings of motivation behind the sending of the only-begotten.

Again, God is the initiator, and acts to respond to the very real need of humanity. This time the need for refreshment is replaced with the need for everlasting life – though it is plain that rest and life and interwoven concepts in the Scriptures.

If there is some way to not hurry to the giving of the Son, but pause over the eternal love of God, and in that meditation to grasp something of the height and depth and breadth of eternal love, then we might be comforted in knowing God's desire for us.

This is a true saying, and worthy of men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

We have been led from the human heart, and its desire for refreshment, through God's heart of eternal love. And now we come to the Apostle Paul's description of the loving work that Christ Jesus was sent to do.

Modern translators have changed 'men' to 'people', rightly reflecting the changing usage of these words. Here we have the Saviour's work of salvation described as we experience it: that he came to us, into this world. He came to save, and those he has rescued are named 'sinners'.

In our modern technology the notion of 'saving' has come to encapsulate the preserving action taken by the computer user, who has created a document and wishes to keep it, and so clicks the 'save' icon (which remains a floppy disk, though hardly any of us use them anymore).

But Jesus' work was more akin to retrieving virus-laden software from the trash, cleaning it and restoring it to full and correct function. In this we have the 'refreshment' that our hearts desire and that God lovingly provides.

If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins.

The final word of comfort draws our eyes upward – to see the saving, refreshing work of Christ from a heavenly point of view. His coming into the world is matched by his ascension into the royal courtroom of the Divine Majesty.

The apostle John speaks of Christ Jesus as our defender, whose righteousness covers us and in an ongoing way deals with our sin. Propitiation is a word that has fallen out of common use – some recent translators have used the phrase, 'atoning sacrifice' to express the apostle's thought.

Perhaps the word 'propitiation' has dropped from our vocabulary because we are fuzzy on sin, and horror of unfaithfulness in the eyes of our faithful God. Propitiation is about turning away indignation and anger. Thus, when God is rightly angry at humanity for sin, we have God's own provision of the propitiation that makes our entry to his royal courtroom possible.

These are the comfortable words for those who move through Cranmer's Holy Communion service and now lift their hearts to God, in fellowship with him and in sharing the sacraments. It is all too easy to rush through such quotations of scripture, and what a delight it was for me to be brought to rest in these beautiful words.

By The Reverend **Jonathan Holt**