

Like a Mother

In the name of him in whom we rejoice because through him our names are written in heaven, dear friends in Christ: There are times in life when it's hard to know what to say. It's especially true when a friend or loved one is in the midst of a crisis of some kind. Maybe they got really bad report from the doctor, or they're mourning the loss of person close to them, or their marriage is coming apart; whatever. It's one of those episodes that crushes the spirit within and makes a person want to cry out with the psalmist, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" You want to be helpful. You want to offer support and encouragement. You want to say the right thing – but you don't know what that is. And you certainly don't want to offer the tired old platitudes that you know you'd hate to hear if it were you who were suffering. What *do* you say? Sometimes it's almost impossible to know. Can you relate to this?

Well, if you're hoping that I have some kind of magic bullet or easy answer for you, then I'm sorry to disappoint. Very often I don't know what to say either. The Lord however doesn't have that problem. In all of life's circumstances he knows exactly what to say to those in distress and emotional anguish. He has words to not simply calm troubled hearts, but also to give the suffering strength to endure their trials and to look forward in joyful hope to the time when they will end.

Today's reading from Isaiah a case in point. Speaking through the prophet, the Lord is addressing a group of people who were in deepest distress. They were the Judean exiles in captivity. They were confined in what amounted to penal colonies in distant Babylon. The story of how they got there is a sad one. In fulfillment of his promises, the Lord had given the people of Judah southern Canaan as their inheritance. As he told them, it was a rich land flowing with milk and honey. But he also warned them that their continued dwelling in the land was contingent upon their faithfulness to him and to the laws he'd given them. And if you're familiar with their history, then you know that long term faithfulness and obedience wasn't exactly their strong suit. No, they seemed to delight in rebelling against the Lord, worshipping other gods, and engaging in every sort of evil practice. So over and over again through the centuries the Lord warned them by the prophets, "Keep it up, and you'll be sorry. I will remove you from this land – wipe it clean of you. I'll bring in foreign invaders who will scatter you among the nations."

Despite many such threats, they didn't listen. So, in 604 BC, the Lord brought the armies of Babylon to conquer the nation of Judah. They in turn carried off and took into captivity the first wave of exiles: a fairly small group consisting of several hundred individuals; mostly high ranking officials and people related to the royal family. Daniel and his three companions were among them. To the people who remained in the land of Judah, the Lord said (and I'm paraphrasing here), "I've brought these Babylonians to punish you. Be faithful to me and do your duty to them, that is, pay the annual tribute they demand, and all will be well. If you don't, I'm going to spank you harder next time."

I probably don't have to tell you that they didn't listen to the Lord. They continued to rebel against him. And a few years later, in 597 BC, Judah rebelled against their Babylonian masters as well; and they didn't take it kindly. They brought their army back and laid siege to Jerusalem, which eventually had to surrender. This time the price was much higher. The Babylonians demanded a huge payment in gold and also took sacred vessels from the Temple to put in the trophy cases of their gods. They drastically increased the annual tribute Judah had

to pay. And some 50,000 Judeans were taken into captivity and resettled in the penal colonies I mentioned earlier. This time the enemy took mostly those who were well educated or who had specialized training: doctors, lawyers, metallurgists, skilled craftsmen – the kind of people whom others might look up to as leaders. The thinking was to do a brain drain of Judah. Take away the natural leaders and it will be less likely that they'd be able to organize yet another rebellion.

Life for these exiles was pretty miserable. Families had been torn apart. They longed for loved ones from whom they were separated. And whereas once they had enjoyed a certain amount of prestige and comfortable living, now they were reduced to hard manual labor. They lived in shacks or hovels of mud and farmed land that you can guess wasn't the best that Babylon had to offer. What was worse for them spiritually speaking was that they were removed from the temple in Jerusalem: the one place the Lord had made his home on earth. So for these in exile there could be no sacrifices for sin, no participation in the sacred festival like Passover and the Day of Atonement. They once took these things for granted – even despised them – but now they saw their immense worth; what a good thing they had and had now lost. They were sorry for their rebellion against the Lord, bitterly so. And they longed to return to the land of Judah. This was their one hope and prayer: that they might one day worship again on the courts of the temple in Jerusalem and receive the forgiveness and blessing of the Lord.

Unfortunately, things only got worse for them. In the ninth year of their exile, their countrymen who had remained behind in Judah very foolishly rebelled yet again against the king of Babylon. It seems that the brain drain worked too well: only dummies were left behind. And this time the king of Babylon decided to make an example of them so that other nations he'd conquered would know what happens to those who step out of line. He sent his armies to wipe Judah and Jerusalem off of the map. All of its cities were razed to the ground. The population was mostly slaughtered. The few who managed to survive were sold into slavery. And the temple of the Lord was completely demolished. Not one stone was left atop another in the whole city of Jerusalem.

When word of this disaster reached the ears of the people in exile, they were devastated. It was the worst news ever. Their one hope had been to go home, to be reunited with their loved ones, and to be restored to a proper relationship with the Lord – kind of like the repentant prodigal son wanting to return to the home of his father. But now there was no home for them to return to, no family members waiting to welcome them back, and no temple in which they could offer sacrifices for their sins. They saw themselves as people completely cut off, without their God and without a place in the world. "The Lord really has given up on us. We have no hope in this life; and more importantly, no hope for the next." The sound coming from their encampments was like that of the eternally lost: nothing but weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

What do you say to people who are suffering in such depths of despair? The Lord knew. In fact he had the prophet Isaiah record his words of comfort to them some century and a half earlier so that they'd be on hand and widely distributed when they were needed. And what he says to them is really quite surprising. They're crying their eyes out and wailing like infants and he tells them (and I'm using my own translation here), "Rejoice with Jerusalem! Shout for joy, you who love her! Exult with her, you who mourn over her!"

That's unexpected! But you see, it's a good thing when the baby cries. It means the child is hungry. It means the child knows he needs something and he's looking for someone to take care of him. Crying is the way the baby says, "Please come help me, Mommy." And this is

precisely the imagery the Lord uses in this passage to describe how he's going to respond to his peoples' needs. Don't despair. Rejoice! Jerusalem that now lies in smoldering ruins is yet going to be just like your mother. She's going to take you into her arms and you'll nurse happy and satisfied at her consoling breast. You'll drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance.

It's a powerful image that portrays the Lord's true heart and attitude toward his people: that of a woman gently cradling her infant in her arms and feeding him or her from ... well, from her own body with the equipment God gave her for that very purpose. Sadly, it's an image that our culture nearly erased and that even now strikes some as uncomfortable. I mean if you go back to before the turn of the last century, the late 1800s, virtually every baby was breast-fed. And families tended to have lots of children back then. So one of the most common sights in the world would have been mothers nursing their babies. No big deal. Ah, but somehow our society got it into its collective consciousness that this was somehow primitive or unsophisticated or even shameful. It was thought to be too animal like. By the 1950s and 60s almost no babies were being breastfed by their mothers. The only place you saw such a thing was in the pages of the *National Geographic* magazine – some tribe of natives out in a remote jungle someplace. Of course, the makers of infant formula and bottles and all the rest of that paraphernalia reinforced this way of thinking and played to it. We were told that formula was better and healthier than breast milk, and that using a bottle was more sanitary and convenient – all of which has been proven wrong. We now know that breast milk has exactly the right mix of nutrients that babies need, that it's easier for them to digest, and that it contains antibodies that help build the child's immune system to ward off disease. It turns out that breast fed babies are less likely to develop food allergies and asthma. Some studies have even linked breast feeding to higher IQ scores. You know, it's almost like God designed it that way – by which I mean, duh! And this is to say nothing of the important bonding that takes place between mother and child on account of the skin to skin and eye to eye contact. Breastfeeding just makes sense. What could be more natural – or beautiful?

Fortunately, we've experienced something of a turnaround in our society on the subject; but if you ask me, we've still got a way to go. Old stigmas die hard. And hey, if you never thought you'd hear a sermon on the benefits of breastfeeding, then I never thought I'd preach one. But then again, today's text calls for it. This is the portrait the Lord paints of how he's going to care for his crying children through Jerusalem their mother. That's how he wants them to see themselves: being tenderly and lovingly cradled in their mother's arms, snuggling at her breast, being fed and satisfied. Later in the passage he has them being carried on her hip and bounced on her knees. He has them being comforted and soothed like only a mother can. He's telling them, "I know you're upset. But I'm going to take care of you. I'll make everything all right again, just like your mother."

And so he did. In the fullness of time he brought his people out of their captivity. He returned them to the land of Judah, where they rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord. And there through the ministry of the temple he fed them with his life-giving word – which, like a mother's milk, contains exactly the right combination of nutrients and vitamins that the human soul needs to thrive. It wards off temptation and spiritual disease. It soothes the guilty conscience. It comforts the sorrowful and gives strength to the weak. It makes one wise unto salvation and ensures proper spiritual growth. It produces all good works in the lives of God's people. Above all it conveys the love, the mercy, and the forgiveness of the Lord. Thus the Lord caused his people to flourish once again in the arms of Jerusalem their mother.

And so he does also for us in our Jerusalem, which is the Holy Christian Church. She is, properly understood, our mother. Through the Church the Lord gives us birth in the water of Holy Baptism. Through the preaching and teaching of the Church he feeds us with his Holy Word. He gives us the right words in all of life's difficult circumstances – the words we need most. And in the sacrament of Holy Communion just as a mother provides nourishment to her baby with food from her own body, so the Lord provides nourishment to us with heavenly food from Christ's body and blood given to us from his cross for the forgiveness of our sins. Through the Church, our mother, the Lord soothes us when we're upset, washes away our filthy sins, clothes us with Christ's righteousness, and causes us to mature in holy faith and to produce the good fruit of the Spirit. He makes us part of his family and gives us all of our brothers and sisters in the faith to love and care for. And he grants to us everlasting life. She really is a mother to us – and what a mother she is!

Therefore it's right that we too rejoice with our Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all we who love her ... that we may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; and drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance. May the Lord grant it to us now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!