

## Comfort

By Christine Blackburn

I love 'Little Free Libraries'. I stop at nearly every one when I am out walking. The other day a book called 'Comfort Foods: 100 home-style dishes' caught my eye. There was that word 'comfort', together with a photo of cheese macaroni – a truly scrumptious dish especially on a cold, winter day, but one I shy away from because it's so calorific!

Recently, I seem to have been attending an inordinate number of memorial services. This is probably because a) I am old, and b) because I am living through a pandemic. Both of these factors have caused me to think of death and examine my own mortality, uncomfortable as that may be. For, I am going to die despite my best efforts to stay a healthy!

Because of my recent experiences I have been thinking a lot about what comforts us in hard times. We all like to feel comfortable both physically and mentally. Warmth, shelter, food, and safety are fundamentals of life that, when met, enable us to flourish. But things such as comfort foods and fuzzy blankets particularly serve our physical needs.

Each of us has our own secret stash of 'what comforts us'. Think for a minute of what these are.

When life dishes out a knockout blow, which it inevitably does if not now, then eventually, we depend on mechanisms that help us recover; mechanisms to reduce stressors, ways of beating back that 'out of control' feeling that causes us to be in a perpetual state of 'personal disruption'. This state isn't good for us. After all, it is common knowledge that a prolonged state of anxiety can increase certain hormones that negatively impact our health. What we choose to do in such stressful circumstances can severely impact our lives.

To nourish our heart and soul, for me and you, we have **our faith** to turn to. It just takes picking up your Bible and turning to familiar passages for a certain amount of soothing to happen – to bring you comfort. A favourite hymn, one of Karen's sermons ... and a tranquility of spirit can ensue.

The recent memorial services I have attended have proved of interest especially with regard to their choice of content.

Whether, at the one end of the spectrum, the deceased left behind a detailed service outline for the bereaved to follow or, at the other, a service thoughtfully put together by friends, families, and ministers, I noticed that the beautiful 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is frequently featured.

Even my 94-year-old aunt, who died recently after contracting Covid in her care home, as it turned out years ago, mapped out her service ahead of time. This was a big surprise to me (and, I suspect, the rest of the family) as she really wasn't 'all that religious' – or so we all thought. And there it was, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Its reading in the crematorium chapel, brought solace to all.

This comforting poem stood in stark juxtaposition to her choice of "Exit Music". Don't know if you know the piece *Human* by the American pop group 'The Killers'? A choice that caught everyone by surprise giving us a glimpse of old Aunt Muriel that none of us knew!

It was as if she was laughing with us and this was really nice.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is a common choice at funerals no doubt because this particular piece of religious poetry brings **comfort**. It provides a simply understood template for self-care. The metaphor of a pastoral, peaceful, image of God as our shepherd guiding us through difficult times is easy to comprehend, especially in times of extreme grief. We are comforted in its reading to know that we can lean on God in periods of strife; through him we will be guided, protected and refreshed to carry on with the life we were given.

This said, it is also important to understand the significance of moving on through 'the valley of the shadow of death' because the antonyms of comfort, such as misery, sadness, and depression, may paralyse or even stop us from experiencing the healing process.

We can't just sit in comfort and use it as a retreat! We need to go forward and move out of our comfort zone, bravely facing the world and its challenges so we can thrive.

The beauty is ... we can bring comfort along with us.

'I will fear no evil: for thou art with me' is such a comfort to know during adversity and a concept to keep with us when we emerge from one of life's knocks.

I look around in our church and marvel at those who have travelled the journey through the shadow of death and have pushed through - coming out on the other side of incredible grief. They are an inspiration; shining examples of their faith. I thank you for showing me the way.

Meanwhile, 'I shall not want', because my soul I know will be restored. As long as we continue to cling to our faith in God then comfort and courage, I believe, will go hand in hand as we travel life's incredible journey.