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COMFORTABLE WORDS

Of all the words in the liturgy of the Holy Communion, none is more welcome to a tired and weary soul than the familiar words called comfortable. "Hear what comfortable words our Savior Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him."

Here we are told to listen. Our Savior is speaking. His words convey the most profound solace the very moment we hear them.

"Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." The invitation is to come. There are no prerequisites except to come as one truly is – in travail and heavy laden.

To come as one truly is, is the key. The burdened soul makes his way in the only fashion that we may come to Christ - in humility. This is the way that God uses weariness and heaviness to bear fruit. We are brought to our knees and so we are prepared to listen. Only then may we hear the comfort of the Savior.

Often, too often, we are not aware of the spiritual pride that accompanies our hearing of these words. We have our minds set on particular sins, we have confessed them, received absolution, and we have done well with these, we think. We do not feel much in travail or heavy laden. But the reality is we have left much of ourselves undiscovered, and what would be all too sufficient to make us fall on our knees remains at the back of our minds.

And so it is a blessing, really, when we are able to come truly, when the actuality of our sins is burdensome. Then and only then are we able to withstand the onslaught of spiritual pride, and hear the Savior speak.

We should also mention accidental suffering, not just that which is the result of our sins, but that which is the result of the sins of others, or of a universe where accidents may and do occur. The accidental universe is the only kind of universe that can admit of freewill, the reality of human love, or its absence. We do indeed suffer from causes beyond our control. These also bear down upon us, and make our journey wearisome.

Still, from underneath the weight of our sin and whatever accidental evil may afflict us, the Savior bids us come. He speaks words of refreshment: "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.”

Whatever our circumstance, whatever it may be, our Savior bids us remember the love of God. It is he that has loved us first, even while we were gone astray from him, and in his infinite love, he has given us his only Son.

When we hear these comfortable words, what do we take them to mean? If we can begin to plumb the depths of their meaning, comfort unimaginable awaits us. We come to be refreshed, made new. And we find that God is not a mere affectionate or compassionate being like we know in the better course of human nature. God is Love himself and he knows the truth and end of love. He gives his Son whom he loves in the depths of his nature that we may believe in him.

Here now we are moved again to listen. God is Love, and in his love for us he has given himself, his only-begotten Son, that we might believe and not perish beneath our weariness and heaviness. This is the very basis of all belief, the truest element of Theology, the most profound presupposition of human knowing. Christ Jesus invites us to come to him and to learn of the infinite love of God for us, love that reaches out while we went astray from him.

The essence of faith is trust in the Savior in all that he teaches and does. It is simply and profoundly belief in Jesus, in who he is and what he does, and not finally in ourselves. When we entrust ourselves to him, when we truly believe, then fountains of living water flow from within, and we are refreshed.

It is the most remarkable moment, not just in our lives in the midst of the Holy Communion, but in the whole of human history, in the fullness of time, that God would appear as one of us. Jesus does the unthinkable thing among men. He grounds the idea of his kingdom not in mere religion or the sophistication of philosophy, but in himself. He bids us come to him to believe in him. When we do come in heart and mind, we peer into the very nature of the God who is love. And in peering, we see that Jesus, the incarnate love of God, knows the truth and end of love; and therefore, has a purpose of great comfort.

We listen yet again. Now Jesus speaks through two of his greatest apostles. “Hear also what St. Paul saith. This is a true saying and worthy of all men to be received that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” We have been bidden to come to Jesus. The purpose of Jesus coming into the world is not merely for God to establish his kingdom. Nor is it his purpose only to accomplish the justice of God. Nor is it only to do the will of his Father, as if his will were without meaning. Jesus comes for all of these, to establish the kingdom, to accomplish justice, to do the will of his Father to save sinners. Here is the glory of God. He has as the purpose within his own divine and immutable life, within all that it means to be God, that he desires to save sinners. This is the greatest of comforts. God not only loves. He acts. He sends his Son to do the work of bringing his creation back to him. His love will not be frustrated, his kingdom empty, his justice futile, his will thwarted. Jesus came to save sinners.

And now that we have heard Jesus invite us to come to him, and tell us of God’s eternal love, and of his purpose to save sinners, we listen

finally to his continual comfort. "Hear also what St. John saith. If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins." We who have come in humility, in travail and with burdens heavy, are given a final and constant solace. Jesus is our advocate even now, this moment, at the right hand of the Father. He pleads for our forgiveness. And what he offers to the Father is the same sacrifice as before. It is himself. He is the propitiation for our sins. He is the perfect and complete satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. He is our advocate, pleading our cause with the perfect and compelling argument of his own life and death and resurrection. And each time now that we sin, and turn truly to him, we know that in Christ Jesus we are forgiven.

And so, my friends, we have nothing to fear. Jesus bids us come weary and tired. He is the Savior. We need not wait to come until we are perfect. We are not so nor will we ever be, except by his grace in the life of heaven. Now we are only what we truly are, and if we allow ourselves this self-awareness, we shall find the comfort of Jesus pure and simple, always at hand, and full of peace.

The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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