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HOLY COMFORT

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.... O thou that bringest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain; O thou that bringest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him.... He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (Isaiah 40:1-11).

"Comfort" is one of the great words of the English Bible and Prayer Book, and one of the great themes of the Gospel preached by Apostles. Foretold and long awaited by the prophets, fulfilled and accomplished by Christ, it is administered to the faithful in the Church by the one whom Christ taught us to call "the Comforter", that is, the Holy Ghost.

In current usage, "comfort" refers most often to the experience of an easy chair or a soft bed, and a "comforter" is the quilt that keeps you warm. This usage of the word "comfort" is only distantly related to its root, which is the Latin word "fortis", meaning "strong". (It also appears in the words fortitude, fortify, and fortress.) To be comforted is to be strengthened against adversity and affliction, and in the midst of griefs and sorrows, to take heart.

An apt example of this meaning of the word comfort is to be found in the Bayeux Tapestry, that remarkable 11th century artifact embroidered in comic-strip fashion with the history of the Norman conquest of England. In one scene we see a column of soldiers, at the end of which rides Duke William's brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, prodding the stragglers at the end of the column with a big stick. Underneath there is a Latin motto, which may be rendered literally, "Bishop Odo comforts the soldiers"! Comfort here is not ease and indulgence, but words and actions that exhort, encourage, and incite faint and fearful hearts

The comfort foretold by the prophets, however, was something better than a stick in the ribs. But the effect is the same, to stir up confident expectation, to strengthen against fear and despair. What brings that effect in Isaiah is the word of "glad tidings" for Israel, the promise that God would save and deliver them from their exile and captivity. As

John Calvin says in his commentary on Isaiah, "To the gospel it belongs to comfort those who are distressed and cast down, to quicken those who are slain and actually dead, to cheer the mourners, and, in short, to bring all joy and gladness; and this is the reason why it is called 'the Gospel', that is, good news". In that word of comfort, the faithful were exhorted and stirred up not to lose heart, but to endure, to persevere, and even to give thanks. In that word of comfort, the word of future hope, there is reason for present joy.

The human soul faces enemies to its happiness and security within and without. Without is a world in which lurk many devastating griefs and sorrows, which affect us even when we do not experience them directly, through the fear and anxiety they awaken. These external enemies grab our attention more than those which lurk within: yet the enemies of the soul are even more destructive of our happiness: our fatal capacity for self-delusion, the self-destructive perversity of our wills, the consequent burden of guilt. The natural response of the soul which carries this burden is to seek its happiness in the world, and in its goods – power, prosperity, pleasure, honor, fame. Yet such projects in the end fall short; above all, because even the successful man finds that in the world he makes for himself he finds the darkness and disorder of his own soul writ large and inescapable. Those of you who are fans of The Sopranos will know exactly what I mean. "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity".

Where do we find true comfort when it is not to be found either in the world or in the soul itself? Archimedes said about the action of a lever, "give me but one firm place in which to stand and I will move the earth". But where is the soul to find that one firm place in which to stand? We may say, "in God", but God's favour cannot be taken for granted (we do not and dare not presume), nor (despite our constant attempts to do so) can we extract a firm place from him in virtue of something we can do (which is the expression of our souls). If God is to provide for us this firm place, he will do so by grace alone, by the sheer gift of his generosity, unmerited, and undeserved.

There are many moments in Christian worship where this becomes clear; but perhaps none so clear as in that part of the Prayer Book rite of Holy Communion which we know as "the Comfortable Words". After the most searching confession of sin, and the authoritative pronouncement of absolution, the priest says, "Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith"; and then rehearses four sentences of scripture, beginning with Matthew 11:28 and John 3:16: "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. 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". From the lips of Christ himself, through the word of scripture itself, by the words of the Lord's ordained representative, the priest (it is a great mistake for this to be delegated to someone else), we hear and receive the most unmistakable assurance of the remission of sins and the pardon of sinners, which will then be conferred and confirmed in us by the sacrament. In these words we find outside ourselves, and outside the world, the "firm place" in which to stand and move the earth, the soul's true comfort in the face of all that threatens its desire and hope for happiness.

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