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The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

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HOLY COMFORT (II)

Pop culture reference: I was watching one of those "ripped from the headlines" crime shows, whose plot, after the usual sensational twists and turns, ends with a beautiful young attorney's boldly breaking the law in order to secure justice against a child molester. There was, however, a final twist: in the last scene, she is being raked over the coals by the judge in chambers, who correctly divines that the attorney's zeal for justice is really a desire to assuage guilt for having failed before to protect a child from molestation. The last line is the judge's: "nothing can assuage that guilt". Cue credits.

Guilt, it is generally agreed in pop culture today, is a bad thing, probably the result of early childhood experiences with manipulative parents. When faced by guilt, our culturally-conditioned, reflexive response is to deny any rational basis for it. "You did nothing wrong"; "don't blame yourself", "nobody's perfect". Granted, manipulative parents do exist, whose children may struggle with irrational feelings of guilt. On the other hand, honest, searching self-examination soon turns up moral failures in every soul. In various ways, and to various degrees, in our various vocations in life, we have all failed one another, and failed God. We have made mistakes, and some of them serious: "we have done those things which we ought not to have done", and, still worse, "we have left undone those things which we ought to have done": and saying "you're not to blame" or "nobody's perfect" does not adequately address our responsibility. In fact, it diminishes us as human beings, to be told that moral failure is something trivial and irrelevant. Human dignity does not begin with the self-justifying moral vacuity of "nobody's perfect", but with the honest confession that "there is no health in us".

There is a much worse thing than feelings of guilt: the inability to feel guilt. Sociopaths cannot feel guilt. Unrestrained by the voice of conscience, they are capable of enormities of crime. We should thank God for guilt: in the absence of something better, it serves to restrain in some degree our corrupt passions, and to prevent society from exploding in violence and chaos.

But there is something better than guilt: not the compulsive desire to "assuage guilt", but the forgiveness of sins. Oddly enough, the same pop culture which holds guilt to be a bad thing, does not believe in the forgiveness of sins or the redemption of sinners. And this perhaps is not just pop culture speaking, but something deep in the unregenerate human soul. We may grant this view-point some basis: unless we had

God's word for it, we should not know that there in fact is forgiveness of sins. But we do: "This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:1).

Those who deny that God can forgive sins have not begun to grapple with what it means to be God – "with whom nothing is impossible" (Luke 1:37). Those who deny that God does forgive sins have not yet fully engaged with the apostolic testimony to Jesus Christ. But those who do, begin to know the comfort of our religion: the wild and impossible and amazing hope of new life for the lost. In next week's parish paper I will discuss how the forgiveness of sins changes everything.

The soul's true comfort is not found by denying guilt. Nor is it found by assuaging guilt. It is found in the forgiveness of sins. I know many sincere Christians who find that hard to accept – and at times, in the faithlessness of despair, I am one of them. That's understandable: but it's also not true. And unless we do believe it, we cannot know the comfort of our religion.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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