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HOLY COMFORT (III)

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"Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith...." In the last two weeks I began to look at one of the great themes and great words of the Christian religion, namely comfort. This comfort, I argued, is to be found not outside ourselves in the world, nor within ourselves, in the soul, neither of which can be relied upon. It is found instead beyond the world and beyond ourselves in the free grace and mercy of God, in the remission of sins. Foretold by the prophets; fulfilled by Christ; administered by the Holy Ghost, the Comforter; declared by the Church in the ministry of Word and Sacrament; and received by means of faith, comfort is not the ease of self-indulgence, but rather the inner strength and encouragement given to those whose sins are forgiven because they are in Christ. As a 16th century divine (Zacharias Ursinus) put it, "The substance of our comfort is this, that we are ingrafted into Christ by faith, that through him we are reconciled to, and beloved of God, that thus he may care for and save us eternally".

Those who are familiar with the Prayer Book Catechism will recognize that this summary statement spells out what is hinted at in the Catechism's statement about the benefits of Baptism: "wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven." By union with Christ, participating in his divine Sonship, we receive from the Father the grace that heals the perversity of the soul, the mercy that preserves us in the world, and the goodness that sanctifies us in readiness for eternal joy. This is spelled out even more fully by the one of the great Reformation statements of faith, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563:

Question: "What is thy only comfort in life and in death?" Answer: "That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who, with his precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that, without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation: and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto him".

Archimedes had said about the action of a lever, "give me a firm place

to stand, and I will move the earth". In the word of the gospel, in the promise of the remission of sins in Christ, there is such a firm place to stand that those who stand in it are able to "move the earth". "Here I stand, I can do no other", declared Luther before the hostile powers of church and state. That inner strength, which is able to face the worst evils of the world without or the soul within, and not fall into utter despair, is part of our common heritage as Christians. It is the faith of martyrs and confessors. Perhaps the best-known expression of this holy comfort is Luther's hymn "A mighty fortress", his paraphrase of Psalm 46 ("God is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble"): "And though this world, with devils filled, /Should threaten to undo us;/ we will not fear, for God hath willed /His truth to triumph through us:/The prince of darkness grim, /We tremble not for him; /His rage we can endure, /For lo! His doom is sure, /One little word shall fell him."

Here is no superficial optimism about the world or its improvement, nor an easy triumphalism about what we are capable of: both outwardly in the world and inwardly in our souls we are ever threatened by Satan's power. Yet in the face of these threats there is the conviction, that to the children of God "all things" in this world, even the worst, even the greatest sorrows, even our own sins, "work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). And therefore we are "persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers... shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:38, 39). Because God is God, he is able to work through all things to bring us to the enjoyment of eternal good: and because in Christ he is our Father, he does. And that changes everything: our outlook on the tribulations we face without, the temptations we face within, and the goal to which we strive.

This comfort in Christ is not grounds for complacency. As the psalms (that great manual of comfort) constantly bear witness, our sins and troubles may cause the faithful sink very low. Perfect assurance of God's grace and salvation is not of the essence of faith; yet the fact of belonging to Christ – of which our baptism is the divinely ordained sign – preserves the faithful from utter despair. For in baptism "I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven". And therefore, I must enjoy all the benefits of the Father's unceasing watchful care and almighty providence, by which he governs heaven and earth. As Luther used to say in moments of anguish, "Baptizatus sum!" ("I am baptized!").

Enduring the most severe trials and temptations in the world without and the soul within, by which Satan "threatens to undo us", the Christian is and must be humble, contrite, and self-distrustful. Comfort does not mean arrogance, but gratitude, and prayer for perseverance. As a child learns to say in the Catechism, "I heartily thank our heavenly Father, that he hath called me to this state of salvation, through Jesus Christ our Saviour. And I pray unto God to give me this grace, that I may continue in the same unto my life's end". Yet, because he knows that Christ, with all his benefits, belongs to him, he can, in the face of all terrors, be "steadfast, unmovable, always abounding the work of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

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