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Holy Comfort (IV)

Comfort, as I have been saying the last three weeks, is not ease or self-indulgence, but an inner strength which is given us in Christ, whereby we may face the worst dangers to our soul's life and happiness, both external and internal, with confident expectation of deliverance from them. For those who belong to Christ, belong to God; and therefore, whatever their sins or troubles in the world, they can be sure his watchful care over them will not fail, nor his purposes for them be frustrated.

Those who know this holy comfort are "stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord", because they know "their labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Holy comfort is the wellspring of gratitude, a sacrifice offered "not only with our lips but in our lives" (cf. Hebrews 13:15-16). In this gratitude, they are able to comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

In illustration of that point, consider the apostle Barnabas, whose feast day, appropriately, falls on June 11th, shortly after Whitsunday. We first hear of him in the Church of Jerusalem shortly after Pentecost: a Jew of the diaspora, a Levite from Salamis in Cyprus (Acts 4:36), named Joses (a variant of Joseph) but "by the apostles he was surnamed Barnabas, which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation" –or "son of comfort". It is a name suggestive of that inner strength which is the special gift of the Holy Ghost the Comforter to those who are in Christ. What we also see in Barnabas, however, is a singular ability to share that comfort to others.

Before we look at Barnabas' record, however, it is helpful to know that the English word "comfort" (which is itself derived from the Latin root for "strong") represents the Greek word "paraclesis"; and the English word "comforter" represents the Greek word "paracletos" (rendered in hymns as 'paraclete'). The word paraclete derives from a prefix, 'para', which in this case means "alongside" or "beside" and a verb, 'kalein', which means exactly what it does in English, "to call". (If I remember correctly this is no accident, for they are in fact the same word, passed down to both Greek and English from their common Indo-European ancestor. But I digress.) A paraclete, therefore, is someone who is "called alongside" to give help.

In secular usage, a paraclete was a legal counselor, who pleaded one's case in court. When St. John says that "if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous", the word he is

using is 'paraclete.' It is Jesus who, as our paraclete, comes to our aid, pleads our cause before the judgment seat of God, and wins amnesty for our sins. Thus Jesus Christ is the original Comforter: and when he applies that title to the Holy Ghost, he refers to him first as "another comforter" (John 14:16).

But the title of Paraclete is chiefly used of the Holy Ghost, because he administers in the soul the comfort that Christ gives. And in him its meaning is not restricted to the sense of "advocate", although he does plead and intercede for the faithful: "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities... the Spirit himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). Yet the meaning of the Spirit's paraclesis is not to be restricted to just one application of it: the whole range of its meaning comes into play, a range of meaning which is most closely represented by the historic range of meaning of the English word "comfort" - strength, encourage-ment, exhortation, incitement, consolation, relief, counsel, help and support.

With those senses of the word "comfort" or "paraclesis" in mind, let us look at the record of Barnabas' ministry in the Acts of the Apostles: everyone of them comes into play. We find him selling land and giving the proceeds to the Church for the relief of the poor (Acts 4:34-37); welcoming Paul after his conversion when many in the church regarded him with fear and suspicion, and introducing him to the apostles (9:26, 27); being sent to preach and teach in the fledgling Gentile church at Antioch (11:19-24) - and "when...he had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted (parakalein) them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord". Then we hear him bringing Paul from Tarsus to assist him in that ministry (11:25-26); bringing a collection for the relief of the Church at Jerusalem during a famine (11:27-30; 12:25); going with Paul on his first missionary journey through Roman Asia (modern Turkey), preaching the gospel to the Gentiles and ordaining elders for the churches their preaching had established (13:1-14:28). When he and Paul returned from their first missionary journey, they retraced their steps, visiting the cities where they had already made disciples by their preaching, and in each one "confirming the disciples' hearts, and exhorting (parakalein) them to continue in the faith, affirming we must through many afflictions enter into the kingdom of God (14:22). Finally we hear him advocating for the Gentiles in the Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35); and giving Mark a second chance to serve after he had turned back on their first missionary journey (15:36-39).

Barnabas disappears from the Acts after that (tradition says that he died a martyr about the year 60 in his native city of Salamis in Cyprus). But his testimony is more than sufficient. He has shown us the way for us to follow. As Christians, by the gift of the Holy Ghost the Comforter, we are all, in a sense, 'sons of consolation,' sons of comfort; and we are all called to the ministry of comfort, to encourage, exhort, incite, strengthen, relieve, intercede for, and console each other, in the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. I am thankful for the ministry of comfort which we do have here at St. John's: let it be our holy ambition to do so much more.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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