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# The Parish Paper

OF  
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH  
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.39 No.40

St. Bartholomew the Apostle (The Trinity 14) 08/24/08

## A CATECHISM OF COMFORT

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"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem..."(Isaiah 40:1,2). What the prophet speaks of is not comfort in the modern sense, of pain-free ease and pleasure, but comfort in its root sense of moral and spiritual strength in the face of adversity. (The "fort" in "comfort" comes from the Latin "fortis" meaning "strong". It is the same root which appears in the word "fortress", "fortify" and "fortitude".) The Apostle Paul, who suffered much for the sake of the gospel, and had great comfort in it, places the receiving and giving of comfort at the very heart of the Christian religion: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:3-5). Our comfort is that we do not belong to ourselves, but to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

### THE COMFORT OF GOD THE FATHER

That I believe in God "the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth" means that all things come from his love, and are guided by his providence in accord with his eternal purpose and plan of salvation – and therefore, as Saint Paul with great boldness declares, "all things", even the worst evils, "work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). It is a mystery to us that God permits evil: but we know it is no defect of his will or power to accomplish his eternal purpose. As Joseph told his brothers, who had sold him into slavery, only to be saved from famine by his mercy: "ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20). Whatever evil he sends to those who belong to him, he will turn to their good, either in this world or in the world to come. In this knowledge we may be "patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love" (Heidelberg Catechism 28, cf Romans 8:39). The late medieval mystic Meister Eckhart sums up the comfort of the Father's good will with this

wonderful paradox: "God's friends are never without consolation, for whatever God wills is for them the greatest consolation of all, whether it be consolation or desolation."

#### THE COMFORT OF GOD THE SON

Our comfort in God's fatherly goodness and almighty providence is grounded above all in the gift of his only begotten Son "for us men and our salvation": In willing obedience to God's eternal purpose, he took upon himself the very worst of all evils, to bring us to the greatest of all goods. He took upon himself the full burden of our alienation from God and thereby "opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers" (Te Deum). He "went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified", and thereby he made "the way of the cross" to be "none other than the way of life and peace" (Collect for Monday in Holy Week). In all our sufferings therefore we may hope to "follow the example of his patience", and thereby "be made partakers of his resurrection" (Collect for Palm Sunday). For he has challenged and invited us to walk in the way that leads through death to life. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). We do not choose our crosses: they are laid upon us, unasked for, but given to lead us into new life. Faith, like gold, must be purified in the fire, purified of all worldly hopes and loves – "that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7).

#### THE COMFORT OF THE HOLY GHOST

Our comfort in the Father's all-governing goodness and in the Son's redemptive suffering is completed by the comfort we have in the Holy Ghost, whom scripture names the Comforter. For it is the gift of the Holy Ghost that awakens us to us new spiritual life, and endows us with the essential virtues of faith in God, hope in God, and love for God, whereby we are comforted and made strong. The Holy Spirit is the "earnest" ('down-payment') "of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:14); his grace in us is the beginning of glory; in the faith which he infuses into our souls we already experience the victory of God (1 John 5:4). Perhaps we know the Spirit's power to strengthen and comfort most fully when we ourselves are in adversity, as Saint Paul learned in his own experience of "a thorn in the flesh", the mysterious affliction from which he prayed to be delivered. For the Lord answered him, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness". And so concludes the Apostle, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9, 10).

What is our comfort? It is not in any earthly good of any kind, all of which we must eventually surrender. Like the merchant in the parable, we must sell all things to obtain the pearl of great price. But that pearl is an infinite good. Saint Teresa puts the comfort of the Gospel before

us with characteristic directness, in these lines written in her breviary,  
and translated by Arthur Symons:

Let nothing disturb thee,

Nothing affright thee;

All things are passing;

God never changeth;

Patient endurance

Attaineth to all things;

Who God possesseth

In nothing is wanting;

Alone God sufficeth.

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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