

"DRAW NEAR WITH FAITH"

INTRODUCTION

"Draw near with faith and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort".

These words, as many of you know, are taken from the Holy Communion ritual. In spite of our longing, the word "comfort" somehow flutters the wings of doubt among us. What comfort? we ask.

And perhaps our skepticism is justifiable. We think of the world "out there" - the world in which we have lived since last we knelt at the Altar to receive the Sacrament. Our minds run over the news of recent weeks: madmen, murder, mayhem; drugs, deaths; riots, rapes; inflation, over-population, poverty problems, water pollution, air-pollution. Comfort? - we ask. And where is there comfort in all of this.

Our skepticism is justifiable. We've come apart from that world for a little while here this morning. We've come into the church - the church of Jesus Christ. In numerous respects the church is far away from Jesus Christ. The church has not yet answered its critics who charge it with peddling a peace which by-passes all human understanding. The pressure of experience shatters the bright but brittle assurances and hollow sounds of many pulpits. Where is there comfort in this.

Our skepticism is justifiable. We've felt too keenly of personal pain and sorrow and failure and disappointment. We're well acquainted with our own duplicity and deceit. The ugly suffering and the angry conflicts of the world around us differ very little from the world within us. What comfort? - we ask. "Draw near with faith and take this sacrament to your comfort". Somehow the words seem to have little meaning with the world in which we live and work and struggle.

DEVELOPMENT

Let me try to put things in perspective for you and speak to some of these doubts that may be fluttering about in your minds. The question is not whether the world is laced with tribulation and turmoil, nor is it whether human beings are prone to treachery and transgression. The real question, the basic one facing man today is whether the cause or the consequence of existence itself is hostile or meaningless. And to this larger, more fundamental question, the Christian interpretation of life bodily answers, "No - it is not!" Life, it declares, is not without meaning. Beneath, within and beyond the decay, the deceit, the defeat, the discouragement, it affirms that God is involved - ruling, redeeming, reconciling. It is in this affirmation that we find our comfort - an affirmation confirmed for us by the life, the death, the resurrection of Him whom men call Lord. It requires of us a "leap of faith". It's all summed up in these words of Paul: written for the 1st cent., but still with over-tones of rich meaning:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God".

And this comfort - you will note - is not instead of, but "in all our afflictions". Paul is not flinching from the hard realities of life - chance, suffering, accident, sin. It's all there in that word "afflictions". But his affirmation goes deeper. Life's meaning may be a mystery, but it is not missing. God is in it, and in this, we take comfort.

COMFORT OF PARDON

First, let it be noted, it is the comfort of pardon. Paul used the phrase, "Father of all mercies". This was not an accident. John Donne, that great divine of England, once prayed:

"I have been in a grave of sin....where Lazarus had been four days, I have been for 50 years. Why dost thou not call me as Thou didst him. I need Thy thunder, O God; Thy music will not serve me."

The grave of sin, of wrong-doing, is a common grave. We know it well and how easily it can entice us and how soft, sweet music will not raise us from it. Thunder we need and thunder there is - the thunder of the cross, the thunder of a life that was broken and of blood that was spilled for man.

The ritual reads, "You who truly and earnestly repent of your sins". To repent is not to have overcome your sins, but only to admit them, even as Alcoholics Anonymous insists that the first step toward healing is to call the alcoholic to accept his failure, to admit he's powerless over alcohol, that he's made a mess of things, that his life is unmanageable at certain points. You - who acknowledge your mistakes and repent of your sins - "draw near with faith and take this Sacrament to your comfort...." The thunder of pardon has pealed for you. You are forgiven. No matter what, no matter who, you are forgiven by the "Father of mercies". The opportunity for a fresh start, for the new beginning, for a clean slate is yours. Take comfort in the fact that we live in a universe where at the heart of all things there is a power willing to forgive and to let one start over.

COMFORT OF PURPOSE But there's more to it. The comfort of pardon deepens into the comfort of purpose. You are forgiven so you can forget about yourself and your sins. Paul gives us a clue:

"Blessed be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who comforts us....so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction".

There's a paradox in that, but it's the paradox of an inescapable truth. We get comfort - not to keep but to give. The only way to have it is to give it away.

Remember Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman" standing in his backyard on a spring night as a terrible crisis swirls through his life. "Oh, I'd better hurry" he cries in confusion and pain, trying to escape the agony. "I've got to get some seeds. I've got to get some seeds in right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground". So Willy gives voice to the anxiety of us all. We have nothing in the ground....no roots to hold us when the crises start swirling around us.

Lay that panic alongside of the purpose Jesus sketched out for his disciples at the Last Supper, one short sleepless night from Calvary. "I give you a new commandment: love one another". Yes, Lord, we'll try....of course we'll try. Is that all. Is that it? And so he filled it in for them, for them and for us. "As I have loved you" he told them, "as I have loved you, so you are to love one another". There's nothing vague in that, nothing abstract. It's the real thing, and it means suffering, sacrificing, forgiving, being vulnerable to hurt, living as though every one mattered but yourself. "As I have loved you, so you are to love". There's the echo of that paradox again, "He who loses his life....will find it". The surest way to never find meaning or joy or comfort is to make the getting of them the goal of your life. That's the surest way to miss them. And the surest way to find them is to seek them for others.

And so the invitation reads: "You who repent, and are in love and charity

with your neighbors". Who your neighbor is - how close or how far - what his color or creed or sex might be - what he's done you or you him - what steps you must take now and at what cost - I know not. Only this I know. "To draw near and take this sacrament to your comfort...." is to lose your life with all of its aches and pains, its griefs and grievances - in a purpose, a love, another life in which the strange promise is that in so doing you will find it again.

COMFORT OF POWER

Finally, the comfort of pardon and the comfort of purpose are firmly grounded in the comfort of power. Let it be clear here that I do not mean we here get a special dose of vitality or strength which enables us to win every battle, maintain some super-human glow of emotional fervor and tranquility, find some infallible insight or miraculous answer for our problem. It is not extraordinary human power the gospel refers to, but the power of God. This is an internal power - a power that controls but does not coerce, that is willing to be denied, rejected, crucified, but yet keeps coming, shaping, healing, opening up new possibilities, giving new choices. I suppose there are times in all our lives when someone's love for us, or ours for them, has a flicker of this quality to it. But it is just in those experiences we realize that the love we've known is not something we've achieved but something that has happened to us and through us - infinitely bigger than ourselves, bigger than all of us.

So the comfort of power is the comfort of that love - that grace, that silent sure force moving and molding the world and us through all the defeats and victories, laughter and tears. It is the power of God - pulsing in the heart of things and in our hearts and who at last will have his way, however many crucifixions and resurrections it takes.

CONCLUSION

"Draw near with faith and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort". With faith - yes. For in all honesty, we must admit that this meditation has done little to still the skepticism with which it began. I have only said what I believe the Gospel is saying to us - that in spite of the terror and tragedy of the world, in spite of the faults and the failures and frailties of human beings - existence itself is meaningful and trustworthy. Worthy of our trust - because of a person who lived 2000 years ago and the kind of person He was and the things He said, and the kind of God he revealed to us: a God of pardon, purpose and power.

Sometime ago, someone in the apartment house where we live questioned Andy, one of the doormen, about the kind of work I do. Andy, who apparently enjoys playing the horses, replied to the question in this fashion: Oh - Clarke - the reverend in 3 B - oh - he's a bookie who gambles on people. To that insight, I would add: yes, and I gamble on God, too - I'm willing to bet that He is, that He is indeed the kind of God that Jesus told us He was. It's a gamble. It calls for the "leap of faith". I'm willing to gamble my life on him. How about you. It's a crucial matter, a crucial bet, this drawing near to take this Sacrament - in faith. And in the mystery of it all, may it be to our comfort, as precisely that of a father to his children.

PRAYER: Lead us, O Lord, ever more deeply into the mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine of the Last Supper of Thy Son, Jesus Christ. May we see there - plainly - clearly and simply stated - the meaning of our existence and of thy purpose for us and all thy people everywhere. We ask this in the name and spirit of Christ.

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LET US PRAY

Lead us, O Lord, ever more deeply into the mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine of the Last Supper of thy Son Jesus Christ. May we see there plainly, clearly and simply stated, the meaning of our existence and of thy purpose for us and all thy people everywhere. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER CUE: November 6th.

It's a short one, Earl -

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