

Gaudete, The Third Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2009

Rev. David A. Kind
University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

YOU CALL THIS COMFORT?

Isaiah 40:1-11; I Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 11:2-10

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

In ancient times Advent, like Lent, was a time of fasting. And for most people fasting is not that pleasant of an exercise. Fasting can actually be quite hard. And when you get to take a break from fasting, you rejoice in it. That's why this particular Sunday, Gaudete, was kind of a big deal to Christians in times past. It was a Sunday of rejoicing, which is what the name is all about in Latin; and therefore a time in which you didn't fast. But what made it a Sunday of rejoicing was not the lack of a fast, so much, as the nearness of the celebration of Christmas, the commemoration of Christ's incarnation and birth. The Church rejoices because Christ has indeed come and because He continues to come to us through His Word to bless us.

That's what the people of ancient times, prior to Christ's coming, were looking forward to with such hope. They longed for the blessing of God and the fulfillment of the promises He had made to the patriarchs. Israel, after all, had not had a very peaceful existence. It was their own fault of course, for not being faithful to God; but nevertheless, that nation had had a tough time of it. They traced their roots as a people back to the Exodus, a deliverance from slavery and hardship. Not long after they are oppressed by one nation after another until at last they get a king who is faithful, David, who establishes them as a powerful and influential nation. But it doesn't last. They suffer civil war and foreign invasions. After the nation split in two, the northern part is utterly destroyed, never to rise again. And later the southern part, Judah, is taken into captivity. When they come back, it isn't long until they are conquered by the Greeks, and then shortly before the time of Christ, the Romans take over. And these were not simply political struggles, but turmoil that affected everyone. The people suffered because of these things. And the faithful among them knew why. They knew it was because the nation as a whole, and her leaders, had not been faithful to God.

And so they prayed words like those of our Introit Psalm, Psalm 85: "Will You be angry with us forever? Will You prolong Your anger to all generations? Will You not revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You? Show us Your mercy, Lord, And grant us Your salvation..." And trusting in the promises of God they were also confident that He would answer that prayer, saying in the same

Psalm: "Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven. Yes, the Lord will give what is good; and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before Him, and shall make His footsteps our pathway."

Isaiah, who prophesied about the coming destruction of the kingdoms and exile of the people, also prophesied, however, that God would answer these prayers and all of the others like them by sending His son, the Christ, to redeem and restore them. The faithful knew, that when the Messiah came, He would change everything for them. He would bring comfort to them and they would rejoice in His advent. And just prior to His coming, a prophet would appear who would proclaim Him and the blessings He would bring; who would: "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned."

We know, of course, that this voice in the wilderness was St. John the Baptist. And He came before to prepare the way of Jesus. And this task John fulfilled. But now when we meet John in the Gospel lesson, He is not out in the wilderness preaching, but languishing in prison under Herod, suffering the wrath of Herod's wife who hated him. John the Baptist had been sent to proclaim the comfort and victory that Christ would bring. But was this comfort? Was this victory? Was this a cause for rejoicing? You can imagine that John was personally conflicted over this. If Jesus was the coming one, then why was John suffering as the people of old had suffered? And you can imagine how frustrating it might be to be suffering like this when you had just a short time before proclaimed the promise of freedom and victory to others. What would happen to their faith when the one they had heeded was now imprisoned and powerless? And who would believe him now?

We are not actually told what John was thinking or whether or not these kind of thoughts went through his head. But they would probably have gone through my head had I been in John's shoes. What we do know is that John sends two of his followers to Jesus and asks the question: "Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another?" It may be that he asks the question only for the sake of his followers, that they may hear the answer of Christ which John Himself already knows and believes. Or it may be that John's own faith needs strengthening as he sits there behind bars. Whatever the reason John asks it.



And Jesus answers and strengthens the faith of all: "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: the blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." Not only were all of these works that Jesus was performing fulfilling what the prophets had said the Messiah would do; but He was doing these things for the

poor and suffering, and by them was working comfort and relief and preaching peace to them. He was taking away the infirmities and death that must come upon all flesh and giving feeding them the Word of the Gospel that endures forever. He was feeding them life and bringing them more fully into it. And by this He was showing that the old world was passing away and that He was bringing about a new creation; a foretaste of what He was about to bring about for all people through His death and resurrection.

And yet much of this still seems backward doesn't it? I mean here Jesus is going about performing all of these miraculous and compassionate works, and John, who is not only His prophet, but His cousin according to the flesh, remains in prison and is eventually beheaded. And Christ Himself, who saved so many others, who raised up even the dead to life again, must Himself suffer brutally and die. And some of the greatest saints of all time are tortured and killed for their profession of Christ. And it still goes on today in various parts of this world. Where is the comfort in this? Where is the victory?

And what about in your life? Are you not often beset with problems? Are you not surrounded by temptation? Does everything go well for you all of the time? Or do you too suffer as you try to live faithfully, if not in body then in mind and in conscience and spirit? Why is it that those who believe are not relieved of these torments? Where is the comfort? Where is the victory? Where is the rejoicing? And you find yourself asking, perhaps only subconsciously, but maybe knowingly, and maybe even out loud to another Is this Christ the One or do we look for another?

And the answer given is the same one given to John the Baptist. Do you not hear and see what Christ has done? And here I mean not only the signs He performed like healing people and having compassion on them, but what He has done by dying and rising again? Yes He suffered and died. But He did so willingly in order to free you from suffering and from death. And what you now suffer in your life, whether in body, or in mind, or in conscience or in spirit finds its resolution in His suffering and death.

The problem, I suppose, is twofold. First, there are parts of you that don't realize this and do not gain advantage by it in this life. These are the parts of you that pertain to the old creation, the parts that must be put off, the parts corrupted and ruled by sin and death. And these old things, like grass, must fade and die. And you suffer as they do so. Second, it is necessary in this life to experience suffering and hardship so that you will repeatedly be driven to Christ for help and mercy. If you do not suffer you will never know your true need for grace and life. If you never suffer now in some way, you will almost certainly suffer in eternity. And that God would not have. And a third, and positive, point that flows from this is that suffering conforms us to Christ who suffered first and then rose victorious. And so we too suffer first with Him and are raised up with Him and made new.

And remember that the temporal relief Christ Jesus brought to people as He went about preaching the Gospel, was but a sign of the eternal relief His Gospel brings. Removing leprosy was not the real point of healing lepers. Enabling people to hear and converse was not the real point of making the deaf hear and the dumb speak. Making possible for someone to run instead of hobble was not the real point of healing the lame. And giving someone a few more years of earthly life was not the real point of raising up the dead. All of these things pointed forward and upward to the ultimate healing that Christ Jesus brings through the forgiveness of your sins and the restoration of righteousness to you. This is the content of the comfort spoken of in Isaiah, the end of the spiritual warfare: "her iniquity is pardoned". This is what the Psalmist in Psalm 85 was looking for, and in which he rejoiced, saying: "You have forgiven the iniquity of Your people; You have covered all their sin. You have taken away all Your wrath; You have turned from the fierceness of Your anger." Here is God the Lord speaking "peace to His people and to His saints."

And this is what the faithful must always remember and hold fast to: Christ Jesus has come to rescue us from our sins and set us at peace with God. Despite the heartaches and troubles of this life, despite the seeming backwardness of things sometimes, where the righteous have trouble and the sinners seem to be the ones rejoicing, we too can and must rejoice in that we have this forgiveness of sins and the inheritance of heaven. And by faith we reap the blessings spoken of by Isaiah and won by Christ.

And one day, when we die or when Christ comes again, whichever comes first; we who have received forgiveness from Jesus and have trusted in His Word, will at last have the fast of this life broken for us, once and for all, and we will rejoice exceedingly. Then all suffering will be removed forever; and every aspect of our lives and of our beings will reflect the truth of what Christ has now at this time declared to us: our warfare is ended and our iniquity is pardoned. And though we will have withered like grass in body or mind, yet we remain like mighty oaks and cedars in Christ, who has made us new creatures and will bring us at last into the fullness of the new creation. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠