‘Comfort and Joy’

(Pentecost 2020)

The more I worship and think through the Christian year the more I see how the great festivals – Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Trinity, to name a few – are really one festival. They all celebrate one truth. That one truth is this: God has created us in freedom, but things went wrong, so God then reached out to us in a special way to bring us back to a glorious home-coming. You might call it the parable of the Prodigal Son writ-large. On that one truth each feast sheds its own bright colour, and with the aid of that particular ‘colour’ a different feature of the one great Mystery reveals its highlights.

With that in mind, together with our reflections on the ‘fruit of the Spirit’, preparation for the feast of Pentecost this year has brought to my mind a phrase from a well-known Christmas carol. You know the phrase, because we all know the carol and its refrain: ‘...tidings of comfort and joy’.

It’s about comfort and joy that I want to speak today.
What do they have to do with this feast of the Spirit, as distinct from the feast of Jesus’s birth?

Well, in the collect for Pentecost we pray that we might always ‘rejoice’ in the Spirit’s ‘holy comfort’. There we have those themes of Christian life concisely rolled into one. Experiencing joy in the Spirit’s comfort; the feast of the Spirit bringing ‘tidings of comfort and joy’.

Comfort, even ‘holy comfort’ isn’t what we might readily think. The comfort the Spirit brings isn’t the ‘comfort’ of everyday parlance. My dictionary defines ‘comfort’ with words like soothe, ease, and relieve.

But the Spirit’s comfort is first of all about strengthening and not about ease or consolation. The Latin adjective fortis, meaning ‘strong’, is at its root. The Spirit’s comfort is about strength to endure, strength to persevere, patient endurance, we might say fortitude (there’s the Latin word fortis again!)—a hallmark of the developed Christian character. So this year’s feast of Pentecost, as we pray for the Spirit’s strengthening of our inward spirits, is just right for our rather beleaguered circumstances: frayed or worn by ‘lock-down’, beset by worry, fearful of the future, inclined to give-up on lock-down even. Oh yes, consolations and comforts have their place, but, more than that, we need strength to press on amidst our trials.
And the strength we pray for from our Lord the Spirit is a ‘holy comfort’. It has God in it. ‘God is our strength and shield, a very present help in trouble’ – one of the psalms reminds us of that. ‘O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come’ – a favourite hymn, and we all sing that with great gusto, because we believe that God’s strength is far greater than ours; and it’s God’s strength that we need, both energizing our own strength (such as it is) yet supplementing it beyond merely human powers. So we pray for the Spirit’s ‘holy comfort’ today.

But our prayer is also for joy: that ‘we may rejoice’. Our joy is the fruit of God’s strengthening us in our circumstances. Our joy is born of the confidence which faith gives us, namely, that God is with us as a ‘mighty fortress’ through all the changes and chances of life and even as we pass through the grave and gate of death.

In today’s Gospel from St John’s seventh chapter Jesus is in Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles. On the last day of the festival he seems almost ‘wired’ with urgency as, crying aloud, he encourages listeners to quench their spiritual thirst from the ‘streams of living water’ flowing from him.\(^1\) That ‘living water’, John explains, is the Spirit that believers will receive.

\(^1\) Actually, the text is unclear; it could also mean that the ‘living water’ will flow from the believer’s heart (so R. Burridge, *John*, p. 107.)
What does that water of the Spirit bring us?

Many things; well, not ‘things’ so much as qualities of character, the things that really matter in human relationships.

Among those characteristics are comfort, strength to persevere in the face of any and everything, and joy, not so much a thing in itself as the result of knowing and loving Jesus, whose company fulfils our deepest longings and suffuses our everyday.

So we pray today -- and why not every day? -- that we might ‘evermore rejoice’ in the Spirit’s ‘holy comfort’.

That’s why it’s a feast bringing ‘tidings of comfort and joy!’ always, but especially this year.

I wish you all a happy feast! Make it special as best you can.

Amen.

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