

*The Comfortable Words and the Literature of Consolation*  
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## The Comfortable Words and the Literature of Consolation

### Introduction

Anglicans know them as the Comfortable Words, a familiar part of the liturgy of *The Book of Common Prayer*. Though not “essential” to the logical structure of the liturgy and certainly peculiar to the classical Anglican liturgies, they play an important role and connect the Eucharistic liturgy explicitly to the Literature of Consolation, itself an important body of philosophical literature that spans the ages.

What is meant by the literature of consolation? Simply a whole body of works that speak to the realities of suffering and sorrow to offer consolation and comfort. The two terms are inseparable. At issue is how we face and how we think about suffering and sorrow.

I begin with the earliest work of literature known to our humanity, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which originates in the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and which was lost for several millennia before being found in the sands of Iraq and translated in the later half of the nineteenth century. The fragments of cuneiform tablets have been gathered up and from them have been garnered the basic outlines of the story of the hero, Gilgamesh.

A fascinating and important story, it contains two journeys: one a journey of adventure in which the young king, Gilgamesh, goes with his friend Enkidu to the land outside the city, to the forest of Humbaba. Humbaba represents the radical force of uncertainty in a world where we are not certain of ourselves or of the order of things; chaos threatens the city of man at every turn. While Humbaba is the force of the forest, which for us in our awareness of environmental depredation may seem a good thing, in the Epic he is said to be “*the evil in the land*,” the figure of pre-rational and radical uncertainty, a force which outside the city by its very being threatens the city. In a telling image, Humbaba is said to be a “*battering ram*,” a force that can break into the city and destroy it. Gilgamesh and Enkidu undertake the great adventure of conquering Humbaba but really only for the purpose of heroic daring-do, making a name for himself.

It is the second journey that is more intriguing and which relates to the beginnings perhaps of the whole tradition of consolation literature. Enkidu, by a degree of the gods who are largely indifferent and even hostile to the humans who are as nothing to them, dies of sickness. His death casts Gilgamesh into a state of unrelieved sorrow and despair. It changes his appearance and leads to the second journey, a journey to consult Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian precursor to Noah, concerning life and death. Gilgamesh seeks the consolation of philosophy. And to that end, he rejects, for example, the advice of Siduri, the wine-woman who in anticipation of Isaiah recommends the philosophy of hedonism, “*eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die*”, in short, the idea of taking pleasure in the immediate things of the body.

The point is that Gilgamesh rejects this advice. He wants to know. Somehow in knowing we find the ways to deal with suffering. It all turns on how we think about reality, about good and evil, and about the goodness and nobility of our souls in pursuing wisdom. Gilgamesh's second journey is a quest for wisdom in which we begin to learn something about the nature of our humanity. Such is the literature of consolation. In the Epic, that consolation is found in the quest for wisdom which is something vastly different from the gods whose disorder and confusion reveal the uncertainties of the culture about order and truth.

Yet Gilgamesh's quest marks the beginning of a turn towards order and truth and one which will lead to a different understanding of our relation to the divine. In that turn, lies the whole project of the literature of consolation. It is the truth that consoles us and nothing more, and that truth is joy and gladness.

### **The Comfortable Words and the Literature of Consolation I**

The "*comfy words*," as they are affectionately or pejoratively called, are a peculiar feature of the Prayer Book liturgy, however much one might find some precedence in the psalms surrounding the words of absolution in the Liturgy of St. Mark and the Liturgy of St. James in the rites of Eastern Orthodoxy or in sixteenth century Lutheranism such as Archbishop Hermann of Cologne's *Consultations* which is probably the more immediate source. That work places the *Comfortable Words* before the words of absolution rather than after the absolution. "*Here what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him,*" is what we hear in the Prayer Book Communion Service just after the surpassing comfort of the words of absolution, the words of the forgiveness of our sins pronounced after confession.

What we hear are a selection of Scriptural words that are, well, comforting and powerful. But why? And what do they mean in this context? What is meant by "*comfortable*"? Even more, do they have any connection to the tradition of *Consolation Literature*, both non-Christian and Christian? This will be our Lenten consideration: to consider the *Comfortable Words* in relation to the literature of consolation, attending to one or two works in particular in that extensive tradition.

Our Lenten Quiet Day cannot pretend to provide an exhaustive consideration. The richness and the wealth of the material is just so great and vast, each work worthy of so much more consideration in its own right. It will not even be possible to name all of the works that might be included in the catalogue of the literature of consolation. But in general, the literature of consolation deals with the question about how we face suffering, sorrow, and loss philosophically and religiously. The terms are complementary.

But what about the term "*comfortable*"? The great mystery writer, Dame P.D. James, in a work which stands outside her oeuvre of mystery novels, *The Children of Men*, makes the

acute observation about contemporary Christianity that “*the recognized churches, particularly the Church of England, moved from the theology of sin and redemption to a less uncompromising doctrine: corporate social responsibility coupled with a sentimental humanism*”. What this means, the novel suggests is the virtual abolition of “*the Second Person of the Trinity together with His cross*.” Good-bye Jesus. The cross, traditionally seen as the symbol of comfort and consolation, becomes “*the stigma of the barbarism of officialdom and of man’s ineluctable cruelty*”. Good-bye redemptive suffering. There is just the sense that for some, particularly unbelievers, the cross “*has never been a comfortable symbol*.” But in the context of her novel which explores more or less completely the dystopian qualities of contemporary culture, what is more cruel and more barbaric? The cross or “*corporate social responsibility*” which in the novel includes the *Quietus*, a euphemism for euthanasia of the elderly and the inconvenient? What is more cruel? The cross or “*sentimental humanism*” in a world devoid of purpose and meaning? These are not merely rhetorical questions.

They challenge us about consolation, about what is meant by comfort in such things as the so-called “*comfortable words*,” and even more about the rich tradition of consolation literature. Comfort does not mean simply what pleases us. It is not about ‘comfort food’. The word is really more about what strengthens us. And what strengthens us has very much to do with how we think about our life in Christ through his sacrifice. That powerful Christian image connects with the philosophical traditions about the nature and the power of the Good and our participation in it.

But what about the “*Comfortable Words*” in the context of the Liturgy? What do they mean? A Scriptural confirmation of what is proclaimed in priestly absolution, a kind of check on the lingering suspicions about sacerdotalism? Or preparation for our participation in the saving work of Christ sacramentally? Or both? Or neither? Better perhaps simply to consider the words themselves as “*comfortable words*,” words which strengthen us and which complement the interweaving patterns of “*contrition, confession and satisfaction*” belonging to the movement of the liturgy. But in what way and how?

They strengthen our faith by recalling us to God. Though peculiar to the Prayer Book Liturgy, their real purpose has to do with the mystical theology of *The Book of Common Prayer* which is always about circling around and around and into the mystery of God, a constant “*redire ad principia*”. The liturgy is not a linear narrative but is always about our participation in what is eschatological - beyond time and space. We are constantly being gathered into the divine life through Word and Sacrament.

*The Comfortable Words* as a form of consolation literature return us to God, to our life in God, to his goodness and truth as living and moving in us. It is radically about our life in Christ. In a way, that is the simple yet profound teaching of the “*comfortable words*”. They counter our anxieties and our worries, our narcissisms and self-regard simply by turning us to God. As such they belong to the literature of consolation which in one way or another recalls us to the truth and goodness of God in whom there is no suffering, no

loss, no pain, because in God we have all and everything that belongs to our good and our happiness. The task is to learn to see this; in short, to see the radical meaning of Christ's sacrifice which opens us out to the goodness of God who alone brings good out of evil and turns sorrow and suffering into joy and delight in the goodness of the God who cares for us.

*The Comfortable Words* are for those who "truly turn to him." Something is required of us. At the very least a kind of awareness. There is the knowledge of our own sins and follies but that turns upon a prior awareness, namely, the surpassing awareness of the goodness of God without which there could be no knowledge of ourselves as sinners. It is a kind of paradox. The knowledge of ourselves as sinners means the prior knowledge of goodness of God as absolute. At issue are the forms of our participation in that goodness.

In this sense, the *Comfortable Words* in the Prayer Book liturgy simply belong to the fundamental pattern of "contrition, confession and satisfaction," underscoring these theological themes both Scripturally and pastorally. They provide a wonderful counter to our anxieties which are always about our focus and preoccupation with ourselves and our immediate concerns which are precisely the things which turn us *away* from God. We forget the great lesson emphasized over and over again and in different ways that we have nothing apart from God and, its corollary, that in God we have everything.

That alone challenges and changes our outlook. It does not deny the realities of the human condition. In fact, nothing could be more emphatically stated about the human condition than the opening word of comfort from *St. Matthew's Gospel* which is Christ's invitation to turn to him out of our state of weariness. "Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." Refreshment. What is that except a kind of strengthening that allows us to persevere and to do so with the sense that there is something more that is found in our labours and our being heavy laden, even joy and delight in what God wills for us?

*St. Matthew's* words are immediately complemented by words from *The Gospel According to St. John*, namely the famous passage from *John 3.16*. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Powerful words which open our hearts and minds to the purpose of Christ's coming. God in his infinite goodness seeks our good - our everlasting good, our good as found completely and utterly in him. The passage underscores the essential and recurring message of the entire liturgy. It is about nothing less and nothing more than our participation in the divine goodness.

The third "*Comfortable Word*" is that of *St. Paul* from his *First Letter to Timothy*, at once intimate and universal. It emphasizes the purpose of the Incarnation, "a true saying worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners". Wow. This unambiguously proclaims a certain good news in the face of the knowledge of ourselves

as sinners. To know ourselves as sinners is to have a glimpse and a sense of the goodness of God from which we have fallen away. But here Paul reminds us of God's motion towards us in Christ Jesus.

This comforting and strengthening word is followed by the last word again from *St. John* but this time from his first epistle. It is, perhaps, the most theological of the three in terms of its language. It deals with the way in which we in our sins accuse ourselves and stand indicted - the courtroom language is unavoidable and yet entirely biblical. It stresses however that "*we have an Advocate,*" one who pleads for us to the Father, Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is imputed to us to make us righteous, whose righteousness is the "*propitiation for our sins*". The technical term, "*propitiation,*" is simply about Christ's atoning sacrifice for us. He bears our sins for us to make us right with God, making us one with God. It is all about the power of the divine goodness which alone is able to make something good out of our evil and to establish justice out of the forms of our injustice. That is the wonder, too, of the consolation literature which recalls us to a philosophical meditation upon the justice of God and creation.

It is in turning away from God that we suffer. In being turned back to God, our sorrows are turned into joy. We are comforted by being strengthened in the radical meaning of the Christian Faith. We are able to find joy and peace even in the midst of sadness and sorrow. Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth/fifteenth century mystic whose works contribute to the literature of consolation, memorably says that "*all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well,*" but only when we learn "*to live gladly in the knowledge of [God's] love.*" In him we have everything. This is the great comfort and consolation.

## **The Comfortable Words and the Literature of Consolation II**

"*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, says your God.*" So begins the fortieth chapter of *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*. It marks the beginning of what has come to be called *The Book of Consolation* comprising chapters forty through fifty-five of *The Book of Isaiah*. From the outset we may note the connection between comfort and consolation. In short, this section of *The Book of Isaiah*, also sometimes called Deutero-Isaiah, belongs to our consideration of the *Comfortable Words* and the literature of consolation.

The literature of consolation is a great collection of writings that deal in one way or another with the question of how we face loss and suffering. There are many examples ranging from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to Homer - one thinks of Achilles consoling Priam on the loss of his son, Hector, in *The Iliad* - from Sophocles' Chorus in *Electra* to the letters of Seneca, Plutarch and Cicero, from some of *The Psalms of David* to Augustine, not to mention one of the great classics of consolation, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. All of these contribute in one way or another to later works of consolation, particularly in terms of mystical theology.

*The Book of Consolation* in *Isaiah* appears to deal with the fortunes of the people of Israel close to the time of the ending of their exile in Babylon. In the Jewish perspective, any political change of fortune is really about God's power and grace. Thus *The Book of Consolation* highlights the idea of God restoring his people, comforting them in terms of strengthening them theologically, we might say, with respect to the majesty of God, on the one hand, and the compassion of God towards Israel, on the other hand. The last chapter of this section of *Isaiah*, for instance, emphasizes the distance between God and man. "For my thoughts and not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." This strong sense of the difference between God and man is a critical theme and is the condition for the grounding of our lives in the will of God. For immediately before that passage, *Isaiah* exhorts us in ways that anticipate the Comfortable Words of our liturgy.

Seek the Lord while he may be  
found,  
call upon him while he is near,  
let the wicked forsake his way,  
and the unrighteous man his  
thoughts;  
Let him return to the Lord, that he  
may have mercy on him,  
and to our God, for he will  
abundantly pardon (*Isaiah* 55.5-9).

Such words anticipate the Comfortable Words and underscore the point that consolation is found in our being returned to truth, to God, to a principle which is greater than our experiences and our suffering.

This in no way diminishes the reality of suffering and sin; in fact, it heightens it, makes it even more intense. Such is the dialectic, one might say, between joy and sorrow. We are turned back to God in whom we find our joy and the truth of our being. But we are turned back through the awareness of our own alienation and separation from God, not just through "the valley of the shadow of death," as *Psalm* 23 so wonderfully envisions, but through the contemplation of human sin and evil. The reality of sin and suffering is part and parcel of the consolation. The extraordinary idea is that consolation is found in the suffering itself, a suffering which in some sense becomes redemptive. God and God alone makes something good out of evil.

An important feature of *The Book of Consolation* relates more or less directly to the Christian pilgrimage of Lent and especially the intensity of Holy Week. In *The Book of Consolation* there are four famous 'Servant Songs' that have become associated with the sufferings of Christ and are embedded in our liturgy and hymns. The four Servant Songs

in *Isaiah* are about Israel and about Israel's vocation. Israel's sufferings are seen to be redemptive not just for Israel but for all people.

Israel is to be "*a light to lighten the Gentiles,*" for instance, words in the first Servant Song which are later associated with Christ in the story of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Israel exists to make known the will and purpose of God for the whole of our humanity even in and through the experience of suffering and abuse as in the third Servant Song. "*I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting*" (*Isaiah 50.6*). There is suffering and yet in the suffering there is comfort and strength. "*For the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been confounded ... he who vindicates me is near*" (*Isaiah 50.7,8*). There is victory in the suffering. The application of this imagery to Christ as the man of sorrows proved irresistible to the Christian Church, indeed the phrase derives from the Fourth Servant Song.

He was despised and rejected by  
men;  
a man of sorrows, and acquainted  
with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide  
their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed  
him not. (*Isaiah 53.3*).

Christians found in the Deutero-*Isaiah's Book of Consolation* a way to think more profoundly and deeply about the significance and meaning of Christ's crucifixion. The consolation in *The Book of Consolation* is about the divine love for our humanity in the face of our sin and wickedness which alienates us from God's love.

"*But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me, "* words which suggest Christ's words of dereliction on the Cross. Zion here refers to Jerusalem as a shorthand for Israel's restoration. The passage continues with a beautiful and powerful rhetorical question which answers this sense of grief and abandonment.

"Can a woman forget her sucking  
child,  
that she should have no  
compassion on the son of her  
womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.  
Behold I have graven you on the  
palms of my hands." (*Isaiah 49. 14-16*)



Consolation is about our being graven on the palms of God's hands. Such is the divine love made known through the realities of human suffering and misery, through the forms of our finiteness and more importantly through the forms of sin and evil.

In a poem called *The Agonie*, George Herbert, a 17th century Anglican poet and divine, illumines beautifully the consolation and comfort that belong to our contemplation of Christ's Passion and Crucifixion. It is really all about sin and love.

*PHILOSOPHERS have measur'd mountains,  
Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,  
Walk'd with a staffe to heav'n, and traced fountains:  
But there are two vast, spacious things  
The which to measure it doth more behove:  
Yet few there are that sound them; Sinne and Love."*

Measuring mountains and fathoming the depths of seas suggests natural philosophy while fathoming the depths "of states, of kings," points to political philosophy. Metaphysics is indicated in the idea of walking with a staff to heaven, the staff as a symbol of the teaching authority of philosophers. Here the idea is about thinking about the end and the beginning of all things. But then the argument shifts to religious and ethical philosophy. How to sound the depths and the heights of sin and love? Herbert's poem takes us to the cross where we confront both our sins and divine love of God in Christ and are drawn into the redeeming love of God for us. "Love is that liquor sweet, and most divine,/Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine," alluding to the Christian Eucharist.

As with *The Book of Consolation* with the images of the Suffering Servant, there is a kind of intensity of feeling. We are meant to feel the force of the images and as such find a comfort and a consolation even in the midst of our struggles and experiences. Such is our comfort and consolation. It is found in our life in God in Christ. It is about our participation in the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

### **The Comfortable Words and the Literature of Consolation III**

Isaiah's words of comfort and strength that mark the beginning of *The Book of Consolation*, chapters 40 through 55 of *The Book of Isaiah*, have their Christian counterpart not only in terms of Christ's passion but also its application to us in our lives by way of St. Paul. Nowhere is that perhaps more clearly seen than in the wonderful words that belong to the beginning of his *Second Letter to the Corinthians*.

*"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"* (2nd Cor. 1. 3-4).

It is a wonderful and comforting passage and one which belongs to the consideration of consolation. Meister Eckhart, one of the masters of the Consolation Literature, begins his treatise *The Book of "Benedictus": The Book of Divine Consolation* with these words from *2nd Corinthians*. In the words which immediately follow in the fifth verse of *2nd Corinthians 1*, the connection between comfort and consolation is made explicit, yet again, and yet again, through the reality and the dynamic of suffering. "*For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.*" Suffering is paradoxically and inescapably an essential feature of the consolation literature.

The story of St. Perpetua and Companions, early third century martyrs, contains the remarkable phrase of Perpetua. "*Another liveth in me,*" Perpetua is reported to have said, and that sense of the indwelling of Christ in us speaks to the profoundest theme of the consolation literature, the idea of our intimate participation in the goodness of God even in the face of suffering and death. It is really all about Christ in us and us in Christ. Therein lies the greatest good, the greatest comfort and consolation.

And yet, so many things stand in the way of our realizing this truth, a truth predicated precisely on how we look at things, upon our assumptions about the good and about happiness.

This brings us to one of the greatest works in the literature of consolation, Boethius' 6th century classic *The Consolation of Philosophy*. He is not the first to use the word *consolatio*. It is the title of a lost treatise by Cicero upon the occasion of the death of his daughter, Tullio, about whose death he apparently was greatly bereaved. John Donne in the early 17th century draws upon a legend about that grief and about love undying or at least long-lasting in a poem celebrating married love. "*Now as in Tullia's tomb one lamp burnt clear, unchanged for fifteen hundred year/ May these love-lamps we enshrine with light, lasting equal the Divine.*" Donne's poem suggests that the fire of love is not meant to end in ashes; just so the pilgrimage of Lent which begins in ashes is not meant to end in ashes but in the renewing of our loves through our participation in the divine love.

With Boethius, the term *consolatio* becomes indelibly fixed and bound to philosophy. It is all of a piece with a tradition that has its ancient Greek and Roman precedents but also its early Christian and neo-Platonic expressions. One of the great moments in Augustine's pageant of conversions in the *Confessions* is his conversion to philosophy in the form of another lost Ciceronian treatise, the *Hortensius*. It was his awakening to philosophy, to philosophy as the counter to our distresses and uncertainties. Suffering and sorrow, it seems, really depend upon how we look at things, about our expectations and desires, which have far more weight of meaning than the things which happen to us.

We are strengthened inwardly, in our souls, and this is a virtual commonplace of the literature of consolation. But Boethius has special standing in that tradition just because perhaps he belongs so wonderfully to the conjunction of things ancient and things

Christian, to a kind of intellectual and spiritual convergence of philosophy and theology, though for him the terms and the separation they imply would have been puzzling, if not altogether incomprehensible.

His life's ambition was to translate from Greek into Latin the works of Plato and Aristotle to a nascent and emerging Christian world, albeit one fraught with many tensions and contradictions. Writing in 524 AD or so, he was aware of the passing of the Roman empire but also that its legacy was perhaps beginning to be expressed in another form, the form of the Christian faith. *The Consolation* was written while in prison awaiting execution for trumped-up charges levelled against him by the Arian King, Theodoric the Ostrogoth. He lives what he writes and speaks, we might say, and all in a climate of political uncertainty and danger.

Divided into five parts, it is a remarkable treatise. It begins most powerfully with Boethius feeling very sorry for himself and utterly miserable only to be roundly admonished by one of the most remarkable of all philosophic images, Lady Philosophy. Her role in the *Consolatio* is reminiscent of that of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. Like Socrates on Love, so Boethius on philosophy - the two subjects are really one - Diotima and Lady Philosophy teach us the way of the good, the way of true happiness. The whole work of the *Consolatio* is a dialogue between Boethius and Lady Philosophy complemented by exquisite forms of philosophic poetry which in themselves provide a kind of digest of ancient wisdom.

The work begins with the encounter in which Lady Philosophy appears to the grieving Boethius. The image is striking and draws upon the tradition of Wisdom literature in the Jewish Scriptures, particularly the image of Wisdom in *The Book of the Wisdom of Solomon*. Written in Greek, the word for wisdom is *sophia*, hence *philosophia*, the love of wisdom. "For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, ... beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle." Wisdom is understood to be created yet "wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty ... she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness." Some of these attributes of wisdom influence the picture of Lady Philosophy in the *Consolatio*. The only explicit reference to a Scriptural text as distinct to the many references to Greek and Roman philosophy and literature in the *Consolatio* is a passage from *The Wisdom of Solomon*. "Wisdom reacheth from one end to another mightily: and sweetly doth she order all things," a passage that also occurs in George Herbert's poem *Providence*, a poem influenced by the *Consolatio*. Consolation is found in the love of philosophy, a love which counters and corrects our incomplete and false loves.

Lady Philosophy appears to Boethius as a woman whose "burning eyes penetrated more deeply than ordinary men" and who seemed both ancient and ever new, an echo of

Augustine's description of truth "*tam antiquo, tam novo*", truth so ancient and ever new. At times "*she seemed to confine herself to the ordinary measure of man, and at another the crown of her head touched the heavens; and when she lifted her head higher yet, she penetrated the heavens themselves, and was lost to the sight of men.*" These images suggest the diversities and unity of knowledge, a knowledge of things below and things above. The work reflects on forms of natural philosophy, political philosophy, as well as ethical philosophy and metaphysics. The image here in the *Consolatio* contributes to the image of philosophers who have "*walk'd with a staffe to heaven and traced fountains*" in Herbert's poem, *The Agonie*, an image of thinking about the ends and beginnings of all things; in short, metaphysics.

Yet, perhaps the most arresting form of the image of Lady Philosophy is about her dress, "*made of very fine, imperishable thread, of delicate workmanship*" and "*shrouded by a kind of darkness of forgotten years, like a smoke-blackened family statue in the atrium.*" The dress is embroidered on the lower border with the Greek letter  $\Pi$  (pi) and on the upper border with the Greek letter  $\Theta$  (theta), representing practical and theoretical pursuits. Between them are steps like a ladder mounting from the one to the other, from the practical to the theoretical, from the lower to the higher, but the dress is ripped, suggesting a separation between the practical and the theoretical. Lady Philosophy carries a book in her right hand and a sceptre in her left. It is a most compelling and intriguing image.

Steps like a ladder by which one ascends from the lower to the higher echo, suggest, it seems to me, Diotima's ladder by which one ascends from beautiful bodies to beautiful minds to the form of the Good in the *Symposium*. One ascends by *eros*, by love, by the passionate desire to know. But there the ladder is *not* broken. While the ascent is conditional, as signaled in the repetition of a sequences of 'ifs' in Diotima's speech, the ladder of ascent itself remains intact however challenging the ascent itself may be. The torn dress of Lady Philosophy in the *Consolatio* suggests another kind of difficulty that philosophy now encounters and one which perhaps remains with us.

As well as the Platonic ascent of the soul, the image also reflects the Augustinian adaptation of that ascent in terms of *ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiora*, 'from external things to internal things, from inferior to superior,' which also belongs to the structure of the argument of the *Consolatio*. But these are almost intellectual commonplaces and merely serve to locate the *Consolatio* within a rich tradition of intellectual and philosophical reflection. The separation or the sharpening of the distinction between the practical and the theoretical is what is significant and seems to require a more concerted effort at consolation.

Lady Philosophy first of all banishes the Muses of Poetry who are the false comforters of Boethius, not unlike the so-called comforters of Job, for "*they choke the rich harvest of the fruits of reason with the barren thorns of passion,*" a fairly standard Platonic observation but which has as well its biblical echoes, such as the parable of the sower and the seed. In their place, she suggests, will be her Muses, the Muses of Philosophy. Boethius is allowed

to express his distress of soul to her, itself a kind of therapy, a part of what one might call 'the talking cure' in which there is the opportunity to objectify or externalise in words what troubles us. 'Boethius sees the shrink' idea. Certainly in terms of the *Comfortable Words* and their place in the liturgy, there is the necessity of confession, though confession means a clear sense of one's faults and failings and not simply a recounting of circumstances and events, not what has happened to you but what you have done. Nonetheless, the device here allows Boethius to explain his discontent which is more about how what has happened to him is itself a betrayal and a travesty of the truth itself.

One thing remains with him, as she notes, namely his awareness that the world is not moved at random or by chance but by God. That becomes the basis upon which the healing of his mind can proceed. His real problem, as Lady Philosophy notes, is that "*you have forgotten what you are ... you are wandering, forgetful of your real self*" grieving "*that you are an exile stripped of your goods.*" In particular, he is ignorant of "*the goal and end of all things*" and about "*the governance of the world*" by "*divine reason.*" His healing begins with gentle medicines before moving on to stronger medicines. Paradoxically, those gentler medicines are "*the sweet persuasiveness of rhetoric,*" though it is rhetoric in the service of truth and philosophy.

Here he is reminded of the transitory and arbitrary nature of all that falls under *fortuna* which comes and goes indifferently and without care. In a way, the argument of the second book deals with outward and external things in their passing nature before turning inward. "*Why then do you mortals look outside for happiness when it is really to be found within yourselves?*"

The Third Book of the *Consolatio* proceeds to undertake to lead him *ad veram felicitatem*, to that true happiness. By many and different roads one and the same end is looked for, happiness. It is "*the highest of all goods containing in itself all that is good, for if there were anything lacking to it, it could not be the highest good, since there would remain something outside it which could be desired,*" the highest good which contains all goods. It is the kind of argument for happiness as the highest good that will be taken up by Anselm and Descartes as an argument for the existence of God. The desire for the true good is innate, Lady Philosophy says. The problem lies in our clinging to incomplete or partial external goods without realizing how they participate in the absolute goodness of God. Good is sought for in wealth, honour, power, glory and pleasure but what is loved in each is really the good. The argument proceeds to reveal the incompleteness of these partial expressions of the good and the recognition that certain more abstract qualities are sought for in them, namely, self-sufficiency, power, and respect which are really three in one, trinitarian in form, it seems.

This leads to the recognition of the human problem that contributes to our sorrows and griefs. What is one and simple in its nature, humans in our perversity split up into parts, dividing what is really one in itself, not realizing the unity of all goods in God. This leads

to the critical passage about the divine governance of the world in a wonderful philosophical hymn. "*O qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas.*" *O thou who dost rule the world with everlasting reason.* The challenge now is to show how everything that is good is good by participation in the good, an argument drawn from his treatise *Quomodo Substantiae* on that very topic.

The *Consolatio* continues to connect happiness with the greatest good and the good with the unity of all things. The Good and the One contrast with the dissolution of the self into error and multiplicity. Consolation is to be found in our being gathered into the goodness and the unity of God. The treatise proceeds in Book IV in examining the relation of good and evil, the distinction between fate and providence and finding, too, in Book V, that *ratio*, human discursive reasoning, depends upon and shares in the unitive knowing of *intellectus*.

"*God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" The second of the *Comfortable Words* turns upon the idea of eternal life. Boethius provides the quintessential and classical definition of eternity: "*the full, perfect and simultaneous possession of endless life.*" The *Consolatio* recalls us to who we are in the sight of God and to a strengthening of our minds about the truth, the unity and the goodness of God in whom we find our true good and only comfort.

#### **The Comfortable Words and the Literature of Consolation IV**

"*Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort.*" These words belong to the Invitation to Confession in the Eucharistic liturgy of the Prayer Book, words which perhaps we hear as familiar and dear but don't really think about and yet they connect two things, comfort with Confession, and comfort with the Sacrament of the Altar. In both those senses they suggest something of the significance of the Comfortable Words in the Prayer Book Communion liturgy. In a way, the Comfortable Words pick up from that succinct and rich phrase in precisely those two ways: at once in relation to the comfort of confession and to the comfort of the sacrament to which the confession of sins leads us.

They echo, too, perhaps, the words of St. Paul at the outset of his *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, words of blessing in the midst of struggles and sufferings. "*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.*" That is consolation writ large! Two nouns and three verbal forms, yet all about comfort extended and received, but, most importantly, grounded in God. The Greek word for comfort is translated in the Latin as *consolatio*. It is, perhaps, not by accident then that Meister Eckhart, an astute and original thinker on every aspect of the Christian Faith philosophically and here pastorally considered, should entitle his two early fourteenth century treatises on Consolation with

Paul's opening word, "*Benedictus*." The first treatise, "*The Book of Divine Consolation*" begins with these words from Paul, words which not only begin but underlie the argument of both treatises which together present in a concentrated way almost the whole of the tradition of consolation before him.

They are entitled *The Book of "Benedictus"* comprising *The Book of Divine Consolation*, and *Of the Nobleman*, which is really a sermon which complements the first treatise, providing a kind of itinerary of the soul back to God in whom we find all and every consolation. They were written, it seems, like so much of the literature of consolation to those in need, in this case, Queen Agnes of Hungary perhaps in the first decade of the fourteenth century. They reveal the central features of Eckhart's mystical theology.

There are, he says, "*three kinds of tribulation*" for us "*in this sorrowful life*": harm to our "*material possessions*"; harm that happens to "*kinsfolk and friends*"; harm that happens to ourselves in various ways, both physically, in terms of the pains and sufferings of the body, and psychologically, in terms of the disgraces and sorrows of the heart. His aim is to write some counsels of consolation "*with which a man can console himself in all his sufferings, afflictions and sorrow.*" The first treatise is divided into three parts. The first under the guise of various true sayings provides the principles of consolation for all sorrows. The second provides "*some thirty topics and precepts*", essentially a collection of arguments about finding consolation in the face of suffering. And thirdly, he provides examples of "*what wise men have done and have said when they were suffering.*" It will not be possible to be exhaustive about such an exhaustive work and one which involves almost one hundred "*ifs*". The use of the conditional indicates how it is an educative process of thinking, a thinking about the nature of the goodness of God and our participation in that goodness, "*if*" we will think along with Eckhart.

The first part begins with noting the nature of the mutual relationship between a wise person and wisdom, a truthful person and truth, a just person and justice, a good person and goodness. In a way it is about our dwelling in the uncreated goodness of God who is the good in everything. "*That which is good and goodness are nothing else than one single goodness in everything.*" Every good is not just *from* the goodness of God but is *in* the divine goodness. Eckhart here draws explicitly upon Johannine passages about the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son, particularly from the Prologue about how we "*become the sons of God*" by being "*born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*" Consolation is grounded in our participation in the indwelling life of God through being born of God. This goes beyond "*the will of man*" which refers to "*the highest powers of the soul*" separated, he says, "*from time and place and all that.*" But as created powers in the soul, Eckhart argues for something much greater: "*they must lose their own image, and be transformed above themselves into the image of God alone, and be born in God and from God.*"

This teaching provides us with *“true consolation in all our sufferings,”* a teaching *“written in the holy gospel”* but *“recognized with certainty in the natural light of the rational soul.”* Such again is the consolation of philosophy. It is about our being with God and in God for *“in God there is no sorrow or suffering or affliction.”* Consolation is our *“hold[ing] fast to God and turn[ing] wholly to him.”* All suffering comes from our *“not turn[ing] in God and to God.”*

*“Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.”* The comfort, the consolation, lies entirely in our turning completely to God and being with God and in God. It requires losing the image of ourselves and of all creatures since that separates us from God. *“All our being, living, knowing and loving is from God, is in God, is God.”* It is a remarkable statement and provides the principle upon which the whole treatise builds and depends.

The just man rejoices in his works of justice because those works are God’s justice at work through him. This, Eckhart suggests, is why the saints joyfully gave their lives. They gave their lives for the sake of justice, the *justitia dei*. Thus Eckhart doesn’t deny that harmful things happen to people. The whole exercise of consolation is entirely about how we think about them. And if, there is that word again, we are in God then nothing that happens outwardly can afflict us inwardly and even more, we should rejoice in the afflictions that we receive outwardly. Why? Because they bear testimony to our existence and thus to God. To will God’s will is more than the world. If we suffer then we exist. I suffer therefore I am and I am only in God. We cannot find consolation in created things, only in God. This in turn leads to how we learn to love God alone in created things and love created things only in God. This idea will have its poetic expression in Thomas Traherne, some three centuries and a half later: *“you never enjoy the world aright unless you enjoy it in God”*.

God and *“God alone is the single source and channel of all good, of essential truth and of consolation.”* The corollary which equally informs the second part of his treatise is that *“everything that is not God possesses from its own nature bitterness, sadness and suffering.”* In *“run[ning] after created things, from which by their nature desolation comes,”* we are *“run[ning] away from God, from whom all consolation flows.”*

The second part of *“The Book of Consolation”* is a rich compendium of topics both theoretical and practical about consolation found in and through suffering. At times intensely theological and speculative, it is also quaint, pastoral and commonplace. There is in short, a kind of direct and simple wisdom that stands alongside some remarkably profound insights into the Goodness and the Oneness of God, of suffering found in division and separation from the essential oneness of God, of consolation found in our suffering for and with and in God.

There is no suffering without consolation; no suffering that is only suffering, Eckhart argues, noting that *“the saints and the pagan philosophers also say that God and nature for not*



*permit unmixed evil or suffering to exist.*" It is really all about a way of thinking that finds our suffering in God and as such is a kind of suffering without suffering because it belongs so completely to the goodness of God and our willing that will in our lives.

Suffering and affliction often turn on what our thoughts are focussed. The loss of forty marks (money) from one hundred or the fact that we still have sixty marks? At once practical advice, it turns upon an astute philosophical principle. *"What exists and is good can console me; but what is nonexistent and is not good, what is not mine and what I have lost, that must of necessity bring desolation."* Do you think about the bad that has happened at the expense of the good things that also have happened? Think of the good rather than the bad. Same thing with sickness. There are always those who are suffering far more than you. Again, a commonplace, but always with Eckhart, the commonplaces and cliches of comfort are grounded in something principled and often supported by authorities like Sirach, Augustine, David, Seneca, Aquinas as well as passages from Ecclesiastes, from Isaiah, from Paul and from John. Sometimes the same passages are referenced more than once but not simply repetitively.

Consolation is found *in* the suffering and not just *from* suffering and not just past or future but present. Suffering can be for God but even more importantly, it is found in God. Quoting the Psalms that *"the Lord is with a good man in his suffering,"* Eckhart derives a sevenfold consolation: suffering a lot for a good and greater end; suffering with God and since God is with me in my suffering, what more can I want since all that I want is God; God is himself suffering with us which turns suffering into our joy and consolation; compassion of others lightens my suffering, how much more then does God's compassion; suffering for the love of another, how much more is God's suffering with me and for my sake out of his love for me; God's suffering for me is prevenient such that my suffering already participates in his suffering for me in a far greater way, such that suffering for God and in God belong to God himself; and finally, since God is with us in our suffering for God and in God, suffering loses its sorrow. God is suffering but suffering is not sorrow or misfortune but blessedness. All because of the intensity of our identity in God.

The second part of the twofold *Book of "Benedictus"* entitled *"Of the Nobleman"* deals with the movement of the soul in its return to God. Here Eckhart underlines one of his distinctive contributions to theology, the emphasis on unity over diversity and the grounding of all diversity in the unity of God. Our blessedness does not lie in our knowing that our blessedness is in God since that would imply a kind of separation and run the risk, perhaps the precursor of our modern dilemmas, of putting the onus on what we know rather than on the one in whom our knowing, our willing and our being depend. Consolation is not simply in our knowing that God is our consolation; it is in God himself.

In a way that provides an intriguing and extraordinary check or counter to what will later become our epistemological fixations. To be sure, our knowing matters but it cannot be the basis of reality but depends upon a principle of intellection and being that is beyond both; a point which Plato understood.

Meister Eckhart's treatises on Consolation deserve much greater consideration. At this point, all one can do is to point to them and encourage the thoughtful reading of them; "if", indeed, "if" we will, then we shall find true consolation and one which can speak to the disorders of our souls and our times.

Three centuries later, John Donne in one of his Holy Sonnets in the Divine Meditations will contribute to the literature of consolation and in ways that already suggest a different emphasis yet one which connects to the tradition of consolation literature through the devotional traditions that arise in late medieval catholicism. The focus turns more and more to the cross at once aesthetically and spiritually as the ground of our participation in the goodness of God. God is suffering is the meaning of the sufferings of the crucified.

*"What if this present were the world's last night,"* Donne's sonnet begins, asking us to think about how we might face judgement and death. *"Mark in my heart, O soul, where thou dost dwell/ the face of Christ crucified..."* Look into your heart, the heart here understood as the place of the soul, and not the mind, the poem suggests, and see there an image, *"the face of Christ crucified."* It is clear from the poem that Donne probably has in mind the images of Christ crucified that emphasize the sufferings of Christ particularly as imaged in terms of the devastations of the Black Death that decimated two-thirds of Europe in the fourteenth century and left a recurring legacy of fears about plagues. The images of Christ crucified capture that sense of the human sufferings of Christ in terms of the hideous distortions of the human form as a result of the plague.

Look within, Donne is saying, at the image of Christ crucified, depicted on the walls of the Churches, but even more as imprinted on our memories. He asks us to inquire about what we find as remembered within ourselves. Look at *"the face of Christ crucified and tell/ whether that countenance can thee afright."* Does the remembrance of that image frighten you, he asks, going on to describe the features of suffering, of the light in his eyes quenched and the blood of the crown of thorns. It is all about what we see and understand and then from the visual, the poem turns to another aspect of the image, to the inescapable conjunction of things seen and heard, to the words of the crucified. In other words, there is the question about what we see and how we understand, to what is heard and remembered by the witness of the Scriptures to the story of Christ crucified and its meaning.

*"And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell/ which prayed forgiveness for his foes' fierce spite,"* an explicit reference to the first word of Christ from the Cross: *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."* That ends the octet to which the sestet responds in answer to both

what is seen and what is heard. *"No, no"*. No to both our being frightened by what we see in the sense of being condemned and no to our being judged verbally. Instead, the sestet points to the things that separate us from God, what Donne calls his *"profane mistresses,"* meaning all those external loves and interests that are outside of God and not understood within God and as such distract us from God and as such can only contribute to our fears and sorrows.

*"Beauty, of pity, foulness only is a sign of rigour."* Beauty, Donne argues signifies pity, the compassion of the good and the beautiful towards us in our ugliness in contrast to the foulness and decay of which death - rigor mortis - is the sign. The sonnet ends with words about the image of the crucified which has undergone a transformation, a transformation in thought that leads from suffering to consolation. *"This beauteous form assures a piteous mind."* The tone and sensibility is different but the underlying message is the same. In the sufferings of Christ we see the sufferings of God and that gives us assurance, joy and blessedness; in short, consolation.

The consolation literature challenges us in our own times to think more deeply about human suffering as a way of participating in the absolute goodness of God for us. It is what the Comfortable Words teach even as they draw us into the comfort of the sacrament, to our being with Christ and his being with us. What more could we ever want?

*Fr. David Curry*  
*Lenten Quiet Day Addresses*  
*March 10th, 2018*  
*PBSC NS PEI*  
*(Cancelled owing to weather conditions)*