A Comfortable Epistell sente to the Afflicted Church in Chryst, exhortyng them to beare hys Crosse with pacience

John Knox

"Passe throughe the Citie, and put a sygne on the foreheads of those that mourne for the abominations that are commytted"

Ezekiel 9:4

When I ponder wyth my selfe, beloved in the Lord, what was the state of Christes true churche immediatlie after his death and passion, and what were the chaunges and greate mutacions in the commonwealth of Judea before the finall desolation of the same: As I cannot but feare that like plagues, for lyke offences shall strike the Realme of Engelande; and in fearing, God knoweth, I lament and mourne; so can I not but rejoice, knowing that Gods most mercifull providence is no lesse carefull this day, over his weake and feeble servantes in the Realme of Engelande, than it was that day, over his weake and sore oppressed flocke in Jurye.

What was the state of Chrystes Church betwene his death and resurrection, and from hys resurrection to the sendyng of the Holy Ghost upon hys Disciples, and from that time also to the finall destruction of Hierusalem? The playne Scripture doth witnes that it was most afflicted, without all comfort and worldly consolation, and that it was so persecuted, that havok was made over the Churche of God. And what were the mutations and troubles in Judea and Hierusalem before the destruction of the same, such as bee exercised in Histories, and principally in Josephus and Egesippus, cannot be ignorant. For thei witnes, that over that unthankful people wer permitted to reigne cruel, tiranful, and most ungodly magistrates, by whom the people wer oppressed and spoyled of their liberties; by which occasion was styred up sedicion; and thereupon followed so cruell tyranny, that under the name of justice no smal number of the people were burned quicke. After whiche crueltie, followed such murder universally in the cytye and in the fieldes, that the fathers feared theyr sonnes, and the brethren theyr brethren. Whyche unquietness ceased not, untill God's severe vengeaunce was once powred forth upon suche as obstinatly refused and persecuted Chryst Jesus and hys doctryne.

But to returne to the entreatment and preservation of Christes Church at thys tyme (Acts 12). It is evydent, that moste sharplye it was persecuted, and yet dayly did it increase and multiplye. It was compelled to fly from citie to citie, from realme to realme, and from one nation to another; and yet so wonderously was it preserved, that a great number of those whom the wycked pryestes, by their bloody tirannye, exiled and banished from Hierusalem, wer kept alyve til God’s vengeaunce was powred forth upon that most wicked generation. The remembraunce of this, beloved in the Lord, is unto my heart such comfort and consolation, that neither can my toung nor penne expresse the same. For thys assuredly is my hope and expectation, that like as Chryste Jesus appeared to hys Disciples, when ther was nothyng in theyr hearts but anguishe and desperation; and like as he preserved and multiplied their nomber under the most extreme persecution.

So shall he do to his afflicted flocke within the Realme of England thys daye, in spite of all his enemyes. First, I say, this is my hope, that a juste vengeaunce shalbe taken upon those bloud-thristie tyrantis, by whom Chryste Jesus in hys members is now crucified amonges you. And after that, his veritie shal so appeare to the comfort of those that now do mourne, that they shal heare and know the voyce of their owne pastor. And thysh shall our mercifull God doe

1 The care of God is alway one over hys chosen.
2 Hegisippus, an ecclesiastical historian of the second century. Only a few fragments of his work have been preserved by Eusebius. But Knox here refers to five books on the Jewish Wars, once attributed to Hegisippus, and now considered to be the work of a later author, which was published at Paris in 1510, and in later impressions, under this title: Historia de bello Judaico, Sceptri sublatione, Judaeorum dispersione, et Hierosolymitano excidio, a Divo Ambrosio Latine facia.
3 As God did to his afflicted Church in Judea, so shall he doe the same in England.
unto us, to let us knowe, and in practise understande that his promyses ar infallible, and that he wil not intreate us according to the wicked weakenesse of our corrupte nature; whyche alwayes is readye to fall from God, to distruste hys promyses, and to forget that ever we have receaved benefite or comfort from God's hande, when trouble lieth upon us, or when extreme daunger doeth appeare.

And therefore, Beloved in the Lord, albeit you fynde your heartes some tymes assaulted with dolour, with grudging, or wyth some kynde of desperacion; yet dispaire not utterlie, neither be ye troubled above measure, as that Chryste Jesus shoulde never visit you agayne. Not so, deare Brethren, not so; for such imperfections rested wyth Chrystes own Apostles of a long tyme; and yet dyd they not hynder hys gayne-commynyng unto them. No more shal our weaknes and imperfections hinder or let the brightnes of his countenaunce, and the comfort of his Word, yet once againe to shine before us⁴; provyded alwayes, that Judas, his obstinacy, his impenitencye, and traiterous heart be absent from us, as I doubt not but it is from al the members of Chrystes body, who ar permitted some tymes to fal, so that of the most fervente professors they become fearfull denyers of the most knowen trueth. But they are not permitted of any continuaunce to blaspheme, neyther to remayne in unbelieve and desperacion to the end, as in Christes Apostles plainly maye be sene⁵.

And that more clearelye we maye understand our tymes and estate wythin the Realme of Englund, thys daye, to agree with the tyme and estate of Chrystes Discyples, immediatly after his death, lette us consider what chaunced to them before and after the same.

Before Chrystes passyon, as they were instructed by Chrystes owne mouth of many thynges appertayning to that kyngdome of God, whych they neither perfectly understode, neither worthelye then regarded⁶; so wer they advertised and oft admonished, that Chryste their master should suffer a cruell death, that they should be ashamed, slaundered, and offended in hym; that they should flye from hym; and finally, that persecution and trouble, from time to time, shoulde apprehende them. Wyth these most dolorous tidynges he also promysed, that he shold arise upon the third day; that he shold see them againe to their comfort and consolation; and that he shoulde myghtelye delyver them from all troubles and adversyties.

But what avayled all these admonitions to Chrystes Disciples before his death, or in the extremyte of their angiurses shortelye after the same? Did they feare, and verely looke for trouble before it came? Or did they looke for any comfort when the forespoken tribuel was come? It is moste evydente that no such thyng did enter into their heartes. For before Chrystes death, theyr greatest mynde was upon worldly honor, for whych some tymes they debated and contended among themselves; yea, even when Chryste was most earnestly preaching of his crosse. And after hys death, they were so oppressed with angiurse, wyth care, wyth doloure and desperacyon, that nother could the witnessing of the women, affyrmynge that they hadde seene Christ (Luke 24; John 2, Matthew 28); nother the grave, lefte emptye and voyde; nother the angels, who did appeare to certifie his resurrection; nother yet the very voice and presence of Chryst Jesus himselfe, remove al doubtes from theyr afflycted heartes; but from tyme to tyme theyr myndes wyvered, and fully could not be established, that their Lord and Master was verely rysen to their comfort, accordynge to hys former promyses.

In thys case consider I the true Professors of Chrystes holy Evangell to bee thys daye in the Realme of Englundˌ. For these dayes of our present dolor and trybulation have been before spoken and painted in our eares long before they came. Our weaknes and frayle infirmites was also spoken forth before ooure eyes; but who would have beleued that the dayes of our trouble had been so nygh? Or that so short a tempeste shoulde have overthrowen so great a multitude? I thinke no man within the whole realtime. For al men appeared to lyve in suche careles securitie, as that the immutable sentence of God, pronouncing that whosoever will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3), had nothing appertayned to our age. And such a bolde confidence (or rather a vayne perswacion) had a great number, of theyr

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4 Our imperfection may not hinder God to bee mercyfull.
5 God's elect are permitted some tymes horribly to fal.
6 The state of Christis Churche before and shortly after hys death.
7 The troubles of God's elect wythin Englund foerspoken.
own strength, that if they had continued without any backslydyng, they myghte have been judged rather angels than men.

But, Beloved in the Lord, the sworde of anguishe and of dolor hath nowe perced the tender heart of Chrystes Mother, (that is, of his very Churche), that the cogitacions of many heartes are suffycently revealed. The fire is come, whiche as it hath burnt awaye with a blaste the stubble, hay, and wood; so, in trying the golde, silver, and precious stones, it hath founde suche drosse and duste, that the whole masse may appeare to be consumed.

For who now calleth to mind, that the same voyce which forespake our dolours, forespake also oure everlastynge conforte wyth Chryste Jesus? Who delighteth now in hys amiable promyse? Who rejoyceth under the crosse? Yea, who rather doeth not feare, tremble, grudge, and lament, as that there were no helpe in God, or as that he regarded not the trouble which we suffer? These ar the imperfections that continually remayne in thys oure corrupte nature; the knowledge wherof ought to move us earnestlye to crye, "O Lord, increase our fayth, be mercyfull unto us, and lette us not drowne in the deepe for ever." Whyche if we doe wyth unfained heartes, then yet shal Chryste Jesus appeare to oure comfort; his power shalbe known to the praye and glorie of hys owne name, in despyte of all hys conjured enemiees⁸. And thys is the chiefe and principal cause of my comforte and consolation in these moste dolorous dayes, that neyther can our infirmities nor daylye desperacion hinder or let Christ Jesus to returne to us agayne.

The other cause of my comfort is, that I am assured that the judgemente of these tyrantes that now oppresse us shall not slip, but that vengeaunce shal fal upon them without provision⁹. For sufficiently they have declared the malice of their myndes. They have violated the law and holy ordinance of the Lord our God. They have opened their mouthes agaynst his eternal veritie. They have exyled his trueth, and establyshed their own lyes. They daly persecute the innocentes, and stoutly maintaine open murtherers. Their heartes ar obdurate, and their faces are become shameles like harlots; so that no hope of repentance nor amendment is to be had of them. And therefore destruction shal sodenly fall upon them. But with what kinde of plagues they shalbe stryken in thys lyfe, and whom God shal appointe to execute hys vengeaunces upon them, that remit I to his good pleasure and forther revelation. But theyr manifest iniquitie is unto me an assured assuraunce, that longe they cannot escape the vengeaunce, of them most justly deserved¹⁰. But in the meane season, beloved Brethren, two things ye must avoid. The former, that ye presume not to be revengers of your own cause, but that ye resigne over vengeaunce unto Him, who only is able to requite them, according to their malicious minds. Secondly, that ye hate not with any carnall hatred these blinde, cruel, and malicious tiraunts; but that ye learne of Chryst to pray for your persecutors (Matthew 5), lamenting and bewayling that the Devyl shold so prevalie against them, that headlynges they shold runne body and soule to perpetuall perdicion. And note well that I saye, we may not hate them with a carnall hatred; that is to say, only because they trouble our bodyes: For there is a spiritual hatred, which David calleth a perfecte hatred (Psalm 119), whyche the Holy Ghoste engendereth in the hartes of Godis elect, against the rebellious contemners of his holy statutes¹¹. And it is, when we more lament that God's glorye is suppressed, and that Christes flocke is defrauded of their wholsome foode, than that our bodies are persecuted.

With this hatred was Jeremy inflamed, when he prayed, “Lette me se thy vengeaunce taken upon thine enemies, O Lord” (Jeremiah 17, 18). With thys hatred may we hate tyrantes, and earnestly may we praye for their destruction, bee they Kynges or Quenes, Princes or Prelates. And further ye shall note, that the prayers, made in the fervency of this hatred, are before God so acceptable, that oft times he that praieth obtaineth the selfsame thing that the externall words of hys pryer do meane; as David, Jeremye, and other of the Prophetes, saw with their corporall eyes the hote vengeaunce of God poured forth upon the cruel tyrantes of their age; and I am assured that some, which this daye do sobbe and grone under your tyrannful Bishops, shal se, upon the pestilent Papistes within the Realme of England¹².  

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⁸ The cause of comfort.  
⁹ Why God shoulde sodenly strike the Papists in England.  
¹⁰ What we ought to avoyde in extreme trouble.  
¹¹ Perfect and godlye hatred.  
¹² “[In the latter part of Queen Mary’s reign, great scarcity and sickness prevailed, many persons of all ranks died,
This my affirmation proceedeth not from anye conjecture of manis fantasie, but from the ordinarie course of God’s judgements against manifest contemners of his preceptes, from the beginnynge: Which is this,

Fyrst, To rebuke and notifie, by his messengers, suche sinnes as before the world are not known to be sinne.

Secondly, To provoke to repentaunce.

Thyrdly, To suffre the reprobate to declare their owne impenitencie before the world.

And laste, To poure upon them so manifest vengeaunce, that his Church may be instructed, as well of his power, as of his severe judgementes against inobediencie. This was the orde of his judgemente against Pharao, againste Saul, againste Jeroboam, againste Herode, againste the Scribes and Pharisees, and againste the whole citie of Jerusalem (Exodus 7,8,14; 1 Samuel15; 2 Samuel 13).

Our eares have hearde, and oure eyes have sene, the fyrst thrre diettes of the Lordes judgement executed against the pestilent Papistes within the Realme of England. For we have heard their sommoninge and citation duely executed by the messengers of Goddes Worde. We have hearde them accused and convicted before theyr owne faces of theft and murther, of blasphemye againste God, of idolatry, and finally, of al abominations. Whiche crimes beyng layde to their charge in their own presence, they were not able to deny; so potent, so playne and evident was Goddes Worde, whereby their secrete botches and olde festred sores were discovered and reveled.

We know that long processe of tyme hath bene graunted by God’s lenitie to their conversion and repentaunce; and howe litle the same hath avayled, these present daies may testifie. For who now doth not espie their malic peace to encreace, and their obstinacy to be suche, as none can be greater? Shall we then thinke that God will give over his cause, as that he wer not able to prevale against tyrants? Not so, deare Brethren, not so. But even so assuredly as our God lyveth, by whose Spirit was styrred up some of his elect firste to espie the greate abominations of those tyrantes in this oure age; which his messengers in despite of their tyrannye God preserved to proclayme and notifie, before their owne faces, such sinnes as the worlde knew not to be sinne: And as assuredlye as we have espied them still to continue in malice agaynste God, agaynste hys eternall verities, and agaynste the messengers of the same, so assuredly shall we se Goddes extreme plagues poured forth upon them, even in this corporall lyfe. That some of us maye witness to the generation that shall follow, the wonderous workes that the Lorde hath wrought, and will worke in thys our age. Neither shall these plagues (more than the Worde of God which passed before) worke in them any true repentaunce, but still in a blind rage they shal rebel against the Majestie of God. For the deadlie venime of that malicious serpent, their father the Devell, can never be purged from their cankred hartes. And therefore, after these plagues, of whome some see have hearde and sene, (for what a plague was it to the false Bishop of Doresme, before his owne face to be called murtherer and theif, and of the same so to be convicte, that neither could him self deny it, neither any of his Proctors or divine Doctors, being present with him, durst enterprise to speake one worde in defiance of hys cause). After these plagues, I saye, of whome some we have sene, and the reste we shortly loke for, resteth the last, the unquenchable fyre, which is prepared for their

and much distress prevailed. The awful death of Gardiner is well known.” (Note by the Editor of The British Reformers.)

13 The ordinarie couse of Goddes judgment.
14 Papistes have bene sommonned.
15 Papistes have bene accused and convicted.
16 Time of repentance hath bene granted to Papistes.
17 The due execution approacheth.
18 Papistes shall rebell against God to the ende.
19 [Dr Cuthbert Tonstall [also known as Tunstall or Tunstal] was translated to the See of Durham in 1530, was deposed in 1552 but restored in 1553, and died in November 1559, aged 85.]
20 Tonstal convicted of murther and theft to his face at Barwicke.
And therefore, yet again, dearly Beloved in our Saviour Jesus Christ, hope you against hope, and against all worldly appearance. For so assuredly as God is immutable, so assuredly shall he stir up one Jehu or other to execute his vengeance upon these blood-thirsty tyrants and obstinate idolators. And therefore abide ye patiently the time that is appointed to our correction, and to the full ripeness of their malicious myndes. Be not discouraged although the Bishops have gotten the victorie. So did the Benjamites, (natural brethren to our Bishops), defenders of whoredome and of abominable adultery, twice prevail against the Israelites, who fought at God’s commandment: Ye shall consider, beloved Brethren, that the counsails of God are profound and inscrutable: The moste just man is not innocente in his sight.

There maye be secrete causes why God sometimes will permit the moste wicked to prevayle and triumph in the moste unjuste action; but yet will he not longe delaye to execute his wrath, and justly deserved vengeance, upon such as be proude murthers, obstinate idolators, and impenitente malefactors. And therefore have they not greate cause to rejoice: For albeit theye have once prevailed agaynst flesh, yet shal God shortly bringe them to confusion and shame for ever.

Let Wynchester, and his cruel counsell, devise and study till his wits faile, howe the kyngdom of his father, the Antichrist of Rome, may prosper: And let him and them drinke the bloudde of Goddes saintes till they be droncke, and their bellyes burst, yet shall they never prevaille long in their attemptes. Their counsails and determinacions shalbe like the dreame of a hungry or thyrstie man, who in his slepe dreameth that he is eatinge or drinckinge; but after he is awaked, his pain continueth, and his soule is unpacient and nothinge eased. Even so shall these tyrantes, after their profounde consayles, long devices and assured determinations, understand and know that the hope of ypocrites shal be frustrate; that a kingdome begunne with tyranny and bloudde, can neither be stable nor permanent; but that the glorie, the riches, and mainteiners of the same, shalbe as strawe in the flame of fyre. Altogether with a blaste they shal be consumed in such sorte, that their palaces shal be a heape of stones, their congregations shal be desolate; and such as do depend upon their healpe, shal fal into destruction and ignominie with them.

And therefore, beloved Brethren in our Saviour Jesus Christ, seying that neither can our imperfections nor frayle weakenes hinder Christe Jesus to retourne to us by the presence of his Word, neither that the tyrannye of these bloude-thyrstie wolfes may so devour Christes small flocke, but that a great number shall be preserved to the prayse of Goddes glory; neither that these moste cruell tyrants can longe escape Goddes vengeance; let us in comforte lift up our heads, and constantly loke for the Lordes deliverance, with heart and voyce sayinge to our God, “O Lord, albeit other lorde then thou have power over our bodys, yet lette us onely remember thee and thy holy name.” To whombe be prayse before the Congregation. Amen. God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by his omnipotent Spirit, guide and rule your hartes in his true feare to the ende

Amen.

Written at Depe, the laste of Maye. An. M.D.Liiij.

21The last plague of Papistes.