

A Comfortable Epistle sent to the Afflicted Church in Christ, exhorting them to bear his Cross with patience

John Knox

*"Pass through the city, and put a sign on the foreheads of those that mourn for the
abominations that are committed"*

Ezekiel 9:4¹

When I ponder with my self, Beloved in the Lord, what was the state of Christ's true church immediately after his death and passion, and what were the changes and great mutations in the commonwealth of Judea before the final desolation of the same: As I cannot but fear that like [similar] plagues for like [similar] offences shall strike the Realm of England. And in fearing, God knows, I lament and mourn; so can I not but rejoice, knowing that God's most merciful providence is no less careful this day over his weak and feeble servants in the Realm of England, than it was that day over his weak and sore oppressed flock in Jewry².

What was the state of Christ's Church between his death and resurrection, and from his resurrection to the sending of the Holy Ghost upon his Disciples, and from that time also to the final destruction of Jerusalem? The plain Scripture witnesses that it was most afflicted, without all comfort and worldly consolation, and that it was so persecuted that havoc was made over the Church of God. And what were the mutations and troubles in Judea and Jerusalem before their destruction, such as are exercised in Histories (and principally in Josephus and Egesippus³) cannot be ignorant. For they witness, that over that unthankful people were permitted to reign cruel, tyrannical and most ungodly magistrates, by whom the people were oppressed and spoiled of their liberties; by which occasion [because of this] was stirred up sedition; and thereupon followed so cruel tyranny, that under the name of justice no small number of the people were burned quick [alive]. After which [this] cruelty followed such murder universally in the city and in the fields, that the fathers feared their sons, and the brethren their brethren. Which unquietness [This unrest] ceased not until God's severe vengeance was once poured forth upon such as obstinately refused and persecuted Christ Jesus and his doctrine.

But to return to the entreatment [special treatment] and preservation of Christ's Church at this time. It is evident that most sharply it was persecuted, and yet daily did it increase and multiply. It was compelled to fly from city to city, from realm to realm, and from one nation to another; and yet so wondrously was it preserved, that a great number of those whom the wicked priests, by their bloody tyranny, exiled and banished from Jerusalem, were kept alive till God's vengeance was poured forth upon that most wicked generation. The remembrance of this, beloved in the Lord, is unto my heart such comfort and consolation that neither can my tongue nor pen express the same [it]. For this assuredly is my hope and expectation, that like as Christ Jesus appeared to his Disciples when there was nothing in their hearts but anguish and desperation; and like as he preserved and multiplied their number under the most extreme persecution, so shall he do to his afflicted flock within the Realm of England this day⁴, in spite of all his enemies. First, I say, this is my hope, that a just vengeance shall be taken upon those bloodthirsty tyrants, by whom Christ Jesus in his members is now crucified

1 Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. (King James [Authorised] Version, 1611).

2 The care of God is always over his chosen.

3 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 facta.*

4 As God did to his afflicted Church in Judea, so shall he do the same in England.

amongst you. And after that, his verity [truth] shall so appear to the comfort of those that now do mourn, that they shall hear and know the voice of their own pastor. And this shall our merciful God do unto us, to let us know, and in practice understand, that his promises are infallible and that he will not entreat us according to the wicked weakness of our corrupt nature which always is ready to fall from God, to distrust his promises, and to forget that ever we have received benefit or comfort from God's hand, when trouble lies upon us or when extreme danger appears.

And therefore, Beloved in the Lord, albeit [although] you find your hearts sometimes assaulted with dolour [sorrow], with grudging, or with some kind of desperation; yet despair not utterly, neither be troubled above measure, as that Christ Jesus should never visit you again. Not so, dear Brethren, not so; for such imperfections rested with Christ's own Apostles a long time, and yet did they not hinder his return unto them. No more shall our weakness and imperfections hinder or let [prevent] the brightness of his countenance, and the comfort of his Word, yet once again to shine before us⁵; provided always, that Judas' obstinacy, his impenitency, and traitorous heart be absent from us, as I doubt not but it is from all the members of Christ's body, who are permitted some times to fall, so that of [from being] the most fervent professors they become fearful deniers of the most known truth. But they are not permitted of any continuance [to continue any time] to blaspheme, neither to remain in unbelief and desperation to the end, as in Christ's Apostles plainly may be seen⁶.

And that more clearly we may understand our times and estate within the Realm of England this day, to agree with the time and estate of Christ's Disciples immediately after his death, let us consider what chanced [happened] to them before and after the same [that].

Before Christ's passion, as they were instructed by Christ's own mouth of many things appertaining to that kingdom of God, which they neither perfectly understood, neither worthily then regarded⁷; so were they advertised [notified] and oft admonished that Christ their master should suffer a cruel death, that they should be ashamed, slandered, and offended in him; that they should fly from him; and finally, that persecution and trouble, from time to time, should apprehend them. With these most dolorous [sorrowful] tidings he also promised that he should arise upon the third day, that he should see them again to their comfort and consolation, and that he should mightily deliver them from all troubles and adversities.

But what availed all these admonitions to Christ's Disciples before his death, or in the extremity of their anguishes shortly after the same [that]? Did they fear, and verily [truly] look for trouble before it came? Or did they look for any comfort when the forespoken [foretold] trouble was come? It is most evident that no such thing did enter into their hearts. For before Christ's death, their greatest mind was upon worldly honour, for which sometimes they debated and contended among themselves; yea, even when Christ was most earnestly preaching of his cross. And after his death, they were so oppressed with anguish, with care, with dolour [sorrow] and desperation, that neither could the witnessing of the women affirming that they had seen Christ (Luke 24; John 2, Matthew 28), nor the grave left empty and void, nor the angels who did appear to certify his resurrection nor yet the very voice and presence of Christ Jesus himself, remove all doubts from their afflicted hearts; but from time to time their minds wavered, and could not be fully established, that their Lord and Master was verily risen to their comfort, according to his former promises.

In this case consider I the true Professors [professing people] of Christ's holy Evangel [Gospel] to be this day in the Realm of England⁸. For these days of our present dolour [sorrow] and tribulation have been before spoken and blown in our ears long before they came. Our weakness and frail infirmity was also painted forth before our eyes; but who would have believed that the days of our trouble had been so nigh? Or that so short a tempest should have

5 Our imperfection may not hinder God to be merciful.

6 God's elect are permitted some times horribly to fall.

7 The state of Christ's Church before and shortly after his death.

8 The troubles of God's elect within England forespoken [foretold].

overthrown so great a multitude? I think no man within the whole realm. For all men appeared to live in such careless security, as that the immutable sentence of God, pronouncing that whosoever will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3) had nothing [in no way] appertained to our age. And such a bold confidence (or rather a vain persuasion) had a great number, of their own strength, that if they had continued without any backsliding, they might have been judged to be angels rather than men.

But, Beloved in the Lord, the sword of anguish and of dolour [sorrow] has now pierced the tender heart of Christ's Mother (that is, of his very Church), that the cogitations of many hearts are sufficiently revealed. The fire is come, which as it has burnt away with a blast the stubble, hay, and wood; so, in trying the gold, silver, and precious stones, it has found such dross and dust, that the whole mass may appear to be consumed.

For who now calls to mind that the same voice which forespake our dolours [foretold our sorrows] forespake [foretold] also our everlasting comfort with Christ Jesus? Who delights now in his amiable promises? Who rejoices under the cross? Yea, who rather does not fear, tremble, grudge, and lament, as that there were no help in God, or as that he did not regard the trouble which we suffer? These are the imperfections that continually remain in our corrupt nature; the knowledge whereof [of which] ought to move us earnestly to cry, "O Lord, increase our faith, be merciful unto us, and let us not drown in the deep for ever." Which if we do with unfeigned hearts, then yet shall Christ Jesus appear to our comfort; his power shall be known to the praise and glory of his own name, in despite of [despite] all his conjured [sworn] enemies⁹. And this is the chief and principal cause of my comfort and consolation in these most dolorous [sorrowful] days, that neither can our infirmities nor daily desperation hinder or let [prevent] Christ Jesus to return [from returning] to us again.

The other cause of my comfort is, that I am assured that the judgement of these tyrants that now oppress us shall not slip, but that vengeance shall fall upon them without provision¹⁰ [unexpectedly]. For sufficiently they have declared the malice of their minds. They have violated the law and holy ordinances of the Lord our God. They have opened their mouths against his eternal verity [truth]. They have exiled his truth and established their own lies. They daily persecute the innocents and stoutly maintain open murderers. Their hearts are obdurate [stubborn] and their faces are become shameless like harlots, so that no hope of repentance or amendment is to be had of them. And therefore destruction shall suddenly fall upon them. But with what kind of plagues they shall be stricken in this life, and whom God shall appoint to execute his vengeance upon them, that I remit to his good pleasure and further revelation. But their manifest iniquity is unto me an assured assurance, that they cannot long escape the vengeance, of [by] them most justly deserved.

But in the mean season [meantime], beloved Brethren, two things you must avoid¹¹. The former [first], that you presume not to be avengers of your own cause, but that you resign over vengeance unto Him, who only is able to requite them according to their malicious minds. Secondly, that you do not hate with any carnal hatred these blind, cruel, and malicious tyrants, but that you learn of Christ to pray for your persecutors (Matthew 5), lamenting and bewailing that the Devil should so prevail against them that headlong they should run body and soul to perpetual perdition. And note well that I say, we may not hate them with a carnal hatred; that is to say, only because they trouble our bodies. For there is a spiritual hatred, which David calls a perfect hatred (Psalm 119), which the Holy Ghost engenders in the hearts of God's elect, against the rebellious contemners [despisers] of his holy statutes¹². And it is [exists] when we more lament that God's glory is suppressed and that Christ's flock is defrauded of their wholesome food, than that our bodies are persecuted.

With this hatred was Jeremiah inflamed when he prayed, "Let me see thy vengeance taken

9 The cause of comfort.

10 Why God should suddenly strike the Papists in England.

11 What we ought to avoid in extreme trouble.

12 Perfect and godly hatred.

upon thine enemies, O Lord" (Jeremiah chapters 17,18). With this hatred we may hate tyrants and earnestly may we pray for their destruction, be they Kings or Queens, Princes or Prelates. And further you shall note that the prayers, made in the fervency of this hatred, are before God so acceptable that oft times [often] he that prays obtains the selfsame thing that the external words of his prayer do mean: as David, Jeremiah, and other of the Prophets, saw with their corporeal eyes the hot vengeance of God poured forth upon the cruel tyrants of their age, and I am assured that some, which this day do sob and groan under your tyrannical Bishops, shall see upon the pestilent Papists within the Realm of England¹³.

This my affirmation proceeds not from any conjecture of man's fantasy, but from the ordinary course of God's judgements against manifest contemners [despisers] of his precepts from the beginning¹⁴: Which is this,

First, To rebuke and notify [make known] by his messengers such sins as before the world [in the eyes of the world] are not known to be sin.

Secondly, To provoke to repentance.

Thirdly, To suffer the reprobate to declare their own impenitency before the world.

And last, To pour upon them so manifest vengeance, that his Church may be instructed, as well of his power as of his severe judgements against disobedience. This was the order of his judgement against Pharaoh, against Saul, against Jeroboam, against Herod, against the Scribes and Pharisees, and against the whole city of Jerusalem (Exodus 7,8,14; 1 Samuel15; 2 Samuel13).

Our ears have heard, and our eyes have seen, the first three diets of the Lord's judgement executed against the pestilent Papists within the Realm of England¹⁵. For we have heard their summoning and citation duly executed by the messengers of God's Word. We have heard them accused and convicted¹⁶ before their own faces of theft and murder, of blasphemy against God, of idolatry, and finally, of all abominations. Which crimes being laid to their charge in their own presence, they were not able to deny; so potent, so plain and evident was God's Word, whereby their secreete botches and old festered sores were discovered and revealed.

We know that long process of time hath been granted by God's lenity to their conversion and repentance¹⁷; and how little the same hath availed, these present days may testify. For who now doth not espy their malice to increase, and their obstinacy to be such, as none can be greater? Shall we then think that God will give over his cause, as that he were not able to prevail against tyrants? Not so, dear Brethren, not so. But even so assuredly as our God lives, by whose Spirit was stirred up some of his elect first to espy the great abominations of those tyrants in this our age; which his messengers in despite of their tyranny God preserved to proclaim and notify, before their own faces, such sins as the world knew not to be sin¹⁸. And as assuredly as we have espied them still to continue in malice against God, against his eternal verities, and against the messengers of the same, so assuredly shall we see God's extreme plagues poured forth upon them, even in this corporeal life. That some of us may witness to the generation that shall follow, the wondrous works that the Lord hath wrought, and will work in this our age. Neither shall these plagues (more than the Word of God which passed before) work in them any true repentance, but still in a blind rage they shall rebel against the Majesty of God¹⁹. For the deadly venom of that malicious serpent, their father the Devil, can never be

13 "In the latter part of Queen Mary's reign, great scarcity and sickness prevailed, many persons of all ranks died, and much distress prevailed. The awful death of Gardiner is well known." (Note by the Editor of *The British Reformers*).

14 The ordinary cause of God's judgement.

15 Papists have been summoned.

16 Papists have been accused and convicted.

17 Time of repentance hath been granted to Papists.

18 The due execution approaches.

19 Papists shall rebel against God to the end.

purged from their cankered hearts. And therefore, after these plagues, of whom some we have heard and seen, (for what a plague was it to the false Bishop of Doresme [Durham]²⁰, before his own face to be called murderer and thief, and of the same so to be convicted²¹, that neither could him self deny it, neither any of his Proctors or divine Doctors, being present with him, durst enterprise to speak one word in defence of his cause). After these plagues, I say, of whom some we have seen, and the rest we shortly look for, rests the last, the unquenchable fire, which is prepared for their portion²².

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 bloodthirsty tyrants and obstinate idolaters. And therefore abide ye patiently the time that is appointed to our correction, and to the full ripeness of their malicious minds. Be not discouraged although the Bishops have gotten the victory. So did the Benjamites, (natural brethren to our Bishops), defenders of whoredom and of abominable adultery, twice prevail against the Israelites, who fought at God's commandment: Ye shall consider, beloved Brethren, that the counsels of God are profound and inscrutable: The most just man is not innocent in his sight.

There may be secret causes why God sometimes will permit the most wicked to prevail and triumph in the most unjust action; but yet will he not long delay to execute his wrath, and justly deserved vengeance, upon such as be proud murderers, obstinate idolaters, and impenitent malefactors. And therefore have they not great cause to rejoice: For albeit they have once prevailed against flesh, yet shall God shortly bring them to confusion and shame for ever.

Let Winchester, and his cruel council, devise and study till his wits fail, how the kingdom of his father, the Antichrist of Rome, may prosper: And let him and them drink the blood of God's saints till they be drunk, and their bellies burst, yet shall they never prevail long in their attempts. Their counsels and determinations shall be like the dream of a hungry or thirsty man, who in his sleep dreams that he is eating or drinking; but after he is awaked, his pain continues, and his soul is impatient and nothing eased. Even so shall these tyrants, after their profound counsels, long devices and assured determinations, understand and know that the hope of hypocrites shall be frustrate; that a kingdom begun with tyranny and blood, can neither be stable nor permanent; but that the glory, the riches, and maintainers of the same, shall be as straw in the flame of fire. Altogether with a blast they shall be consumed in such sort, that their palaces shall be a heap of stones, their congregations shall be desolate; and such as do depend upon their help, shall fall into destruction and ignominy with them.

And therefore, beloved Brethren in our Saviour Jesus Christ, seeing that neither can our imperfections nor frail weakness hinder Christ Jesus to return to us by the presence of his Word, neither that the tyranny of these bloodthirsty wolves may so devour Christ's small flock, but that a great number shall be preserved to the praise of God's glory; neither that these most cruel tyrants can long escape God's vengeance; let us in comfort lift up our heads, and constantly look for the Lord's deliverance, with heart and voice saying to our God, "O Lord, albeit other lords then thou have power over our bodies, yet let us only remember thee and thy holy name." To whom be praise before the Congregation. Amen. God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by his omnipotent Spirit, guide and rule your hearts in his true fear to the end.

Amen.

Written at Dieppe, the last day of May, 1554.

20 Dr Cuthbert Tunstall [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.

21 Tunstall convicted of murder and theft to his face at Berwick.

22 The last plague of Papists.