

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 foreheades 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 church 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 Englande; and in fearing, God knoweth, I lament and mourne; so can I not but reioyce, knowing that Gods most mercifull providence is no lesse carefull this day, over his weake and feeble servantes in the Realme of Englande, than it was that day, over his weake and sore oppressed flocke in Jurye¹.

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 Church 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 Egesippus², 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 styrred 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 crueltye, 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 vengeance 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 evdyent, that moste sharplye it was persecuted, and yet dayly did it increase and multiplie. 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 tyrannye, exiled and banished from Hierusalem, wer kept alyve til God's vengeance 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 number under the most extreme persecution.

So shall he do to his afflicted flocke within the Realme of England thys daye³ [3], in spite of all his enemyes. First, I say, this is my hope, that a juste vengeance shalbe taken upon those bloud-thirstie 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 thys shal our merciful 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 facta.*

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 received 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-commynge unto them. No more shal our weaknes and imperfections hinder or let the brightnes of his countenance, 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 continuance to blaspheme, neyther to remayne in unbeliefe 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 Englande, thys daye, to agree with the tyme and estate of Chrystes Discyple, 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 Discyple before his death, or in the extremyte of their anguishes 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 troubel 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 whyche some tymes they debated and contended among themselves; yea, even when Chryste was most earnestly preachyng of his crosse. And after hys death, they were so oppressed with anguyshe, wyth care, wyth doloure and desperacyon, that nother could the witnessing of the women, affyrmyng 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 himselve, remove al doubttes from theyr afflycted heartes; but from tyme to tyme theyr myndes wavered, and fully could not be established, that their Lord and Master was verely rysen to their comfort, accordyng to hys former promyses.

In thys case consider I the true Professors of Chrystes holy Evangell to bee thys daye in the Realme of Englande⁷. For these dayes of our present dolor and trybulation have been before spoken and blowen in our eares long before they came. Our weaknes and frayle infirmite was also painted forth before oure eyes; but who would have beleevd 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 realme. 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

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 Church before and shortly after hys death.

7 The troubles of God's elect wythin Englande forespoken.

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 anguise and of dolor hath nowe perced the tender heart of Chrystes Mother, (that is, of his very Church), that the cogitacions of many heartes are suffycently revealed. The fire is come, whiche as it hath burnt away 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 appere to be consumed.

For who now calleth to mind, that the same voyce which forespake our dolours, forespake also oure everlastyng comforte wyth Chryste Jesus? Who delighteth now in hys amiable promyses? 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 appere to oure comfort; his power shalbe knowen to the prayse and glorye of hys owne name, in despyte of all hys conjured enemyes⁸. 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 ordinaunces 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 dayly 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 carnal hatred these blinde, cruel, and malicyous tiraunts; but that ye learne of Chryst to pray for your persecutors (Matthew 5), lamenting and bewayling that the Devyl shold so prevaile 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 carnal 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 theyr 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 tyranful Bishops, shal se, upon the pestilent Papistes within the Realme of England¹².

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 beginnyng¹³: Which is this,

Fyrst, To rebuke and notifie, by his messengers, suche sinnes as before the world are not knowen 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 vengeance, that hys Church may be instructed, as well of his power, as of his severe judgements againste inobediencie. This was the ordre of his judgemente againste Pharao, againste Saul, againste Jeroboam, againste Herode, againste the Scribes and Pharisees, and againste the whole citie of Jerusalem (Exodus 7,8,14; 1 Samuel 15; 2 Samuel 13).

Our eares have hearde, and oure eyes have sene, the fyrst thre diettes of the Lordes judgement executed against the pestilent Papistes within the Realme of England¹⁴. For we have heard their sommoninge and citation duely executed by the messengers of Goddes Worde. We have hearde them accused and convicted¹⁵ 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 denye; 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 repentaunce¹⁶; and howe litle the same hath avayled, these present daies may testifie. For who now doth not espie their malice to encrease, 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 prevaile 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 sinne¹⁷: And as assuredly 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 God¹⁸. 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 wee have hearde and sene, (for what a plague was it to the false Bishop of Doresme¹⁹, before his owne face to be called murtherer and thiefe, and of the same so to be convicte²⁰, 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 defence 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 coure of Goddes judgment.

14 Papistes have bene sommoned.

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 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.]

20 Tunstal convicted of murther and theft to his face at Barwicke.

porcion²¹.

And therefore, yet again, dearly Beloved in oure Savioure Jesus Christ, hope you against hope, and againste all worldly appearaunce. For so assuredly as God is immutable, so assuredly shall he styr up one Jehu or other to execute hys vengeaunce uppon these bloude-thyrsty tyrauntes and obstinate idolators. And therefore abide ye paciently the tyme that is appoynted to our correction, and to the full ripenes of their malicious myndes. Be not discouraged although the Bishops have gotten the victorie. So did the Benjamites, (natural brethren to our Bishops), defendors of whoredome and of abominable adultery, twise prevaile againste the Israelites, who foughte at God's commaundement: Ye shall consider, beloved Brethren, that the counsailes of God are profound and inscrutable: The moste juste man is not innocente in hys sight.

There maye be secrete causes why God sometimes will permit the moste wicked to prevayle and triumphe in the moste unjuste action; but yet will he not longe delaye to execute his wrath, and justly deserved vengeaunce, upon such as be proude murtherers, obstinate idolators, and impenitente malefactors. And therefore have they not greate cause to rejoyce: For albeit thei 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 hys wits faile, howe the kyngdom of his father, the Antichrist of Rome, may prosper: And let him and them drinke the bloude of Goddes saintes till they be droncke, and theyr bellyes burst, yet shall they never prevaile long in their attemptes. Their counsailes 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 nothings 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 bloude, 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 hys Worde, neither that the tyrannye of these bloude-thyrstie wolfes may so devour Christes small flocke, but that a great numbere shal be preserved to the prayse of Goddes glory; neither that these moste cruell tyrauntes can longe escape Goddes vengeaunce; let us in comforte lift up oure heades, and constantlye loke for the Lordes deliverance, with heart and voyce sayinge to our God, "O Lord, albeit other lordes then thou have power over our bodyes, yet lette us onely remember thee and thy holy name." To whome 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.