

## The Comfortable Pew

12/4/05

Years ago I read a book entitled The Comfortable Pew. I remember very little of its content. To my best recollection, I think the book was about how easy we have it in our middle class churches. Whatever the book was really about – and I am certain that it was not the story of a church acquiring new pew cushions - the title has always stayed with me.

It is not unusual during Advent for us to hear scripture lessons that shout forth the hope of comfort being showered down upon the people. “Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” This word of hope goes hand in hand with last week’s scripture in which Isaiah pleaded with God to come down and face the enemy in an act of deliverance. It is the other side of the bridge; the vision at the end of the rainbow. It is the reassuring word that Paul depends upon in his own faith – “Now may Jesus himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.” (Thessalonians)

Comfort...having nothing to do with our soft new pew cushions and, for our purposes today, ... nothing to do with our call to bear witness to our faith in today’s world – to leave our comfortable pew. Rather comfort...the need we all have to be ministered to by a caring and compassionate God. We come to church, obviously, for a variety of reasons. Underlying them all, I believe, is the need we have for comfort. The comfort of knowing that when we walk through the doors of the church, we are embraced. Embraced by more than friends and acquaintances who share the hour with us, however important that might be. Embraced by God.

Indeed, we live in a very different climate than the Hebrew people who were being chased into exile or taken into bondage. In this country we are entitled to follow freely our religious beliefs and there are those who firmly maintain that the earth may change in entirety before this inalienable right will be stripped from them. But though our life of faith is very different from the Hebrew People of the Old Testament, we share a similar need with those who ached for relief from the all too frequent reality of bondage and exile. To walk into a sanctuary...a place of worship...and stand upon holy ground...where we feel a particular strength issuing forth as a reassuring word of comfort.

Now, I know full well that people attend church for a variety of personal reasons. What motivates one may not inspire another or meet another’s needs. So there are those, for example, who come because of the music program in a church. The type of music that’s played, the instruments used, whether they can sing in a voice choir or join a bell choir. Likewise, there are those who attend church because they believe their children should receive religious training in order to live good, moral lives as they grow. Certain characteristics of a church may influence your decision to be here. Or not! It is perhaps easier to list why some people are not in church. Perhaps they came to church one week and sat in a nice looking pew only to be told by others that the pew belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Smith and that they would have to move. Or perhaps it’s the broader complaint – the pastor is too political in his sermons...or then again maybe not political enough!

Well, I suppose such factors will always serve to influence people in their church attendance and affiliation. For once and for all, I think it has to be said that a church is not a perfect institution nor can it be all things for all people. And I know that for two reasons. First, I have been a pastor for a good long time and have become convinced of these facts. Secondly, when I took my year away from being a pastor and simply attended church, I became a wonderful and most insightful critic! Although I still remember the Seminary professor who said “I attend the church down the road because it is closest,” I know that such logic doesn’t

always work. We found a church, not the one on our own street, but in another town! Quite simply, it had better music and we preferred the preaching of the liberal minister and his Associate.

Still, I believe that before anything else happens (and these other choices are made), we come to church (we walk through the front door) expecting one thing to happen. In church, we anticipate the presence of the healing love and comfort of God. That when we have had our worst work week ever, we know that here we can find comfort in the quiet of God's word. If we didn't fit in at work or school, that word says we are at the core Children of God and so we are accepted. We belong! That when we have experienced death or loss firsthand and feel a cloud hanging over our heads, we feel the comfort of a God who gives hope. The promise of everlasting life and eternal fellowship with those we love. That when the world seems to be spinning out of control, the church is where we turn to find solace and direction. And what better time for this is Advent! With consumerism driving us to push through the Shopping Mall doors at 6:00 in the morning, or maybe earlier, in church we encounter a reasoning that, while not discounting the secular, redirects our attention to the sacred and says that this is where things of value truly lie – in relationships of love, respect and trust.

I am not saying that the church meets our needs only when things are most chaotic and discouraging, though it may have a clearer message then than at other times. What I am trying to say is that when we are surrounded by the sacred, (which church is – it's a holy place), there is a Spirit that supersedes all else. We find meaning; we discover our purpose; we gain perspective.

Isn't this debate over whether the Tree is a Holiday Tree or a Christmas Tree amusing? I am so disengaged from this discussion! And this is why...the words of Christina Rossetti: "Our God transcends all heaven, earth and its domain. Heaven and earth shall flee away when Christ comes to reign." When we enter church, we find ourselves in the presence of God. God's comfort breathes strength into hearts that ache, reassurance into bodies that struggle to find inner contentment and hope into hearts that hunger for a world of peace and justice.