

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Presentation of Christ in the Temple,
commonly called
The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary^{1,2}
(February 2)

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the first Chapter of the First Book of Samuel, otherwise called the First Book of the Kings.⁴

“... And the man Elkanah [ell-KAY-nuh], and all his house, went up to offer unto the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and his vow. But Hannah went not up; for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD, and there abide for ever. And Elkanah [ell-KAY-nuh] her husband said unto her, Do what seemeth thee good; tarry until thou have weaned him; only the LORD establish his word. So the woman abode, and gave her son suck until she weaned him.

“And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bullocks, and one ephah [EE-fuh] of flour, and a bottle of wine, and brought him unto the house of the LORD in Shiloh: and the child was young. And they slew a bullock, and brought the child to Eli. And she said, Oh my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition which I asked of him: Therefore also I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the LORD. And he worshipped the LORD there.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Galatians:⁵

“Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is

under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba [AH-buh], Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[W]hen the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Introduction and Theme:

There are two main reasons that St. Paul’s arguments in his Epistles are often difficult for modern readers to follow. One is that he often used allegorical methods of interpreting Scripture that were common among the rabbis of his day but that are virtually unknown today, at least to modern Christians. The other is that, quite reasonably, he often referred to social institutions that were common in his day but that are either unknown or, at least, rare, in our time.

Today’s Second Lesson is an example of that second sort of difficulty: Paul’s point is made by reference to social practices that, in part, are nonexistent in our society and, in part, to others which, if they persist at all among us, persist only among the extremely wealthy.

⁴ I Samuel 1:21-end (KJV).

⁵ Galatians 4:1-7 (KJV).

⁶ Galatians 4:4-5 (RSV).

⁷ Galatians 4:1 (RSV).

⁸ Galatians 4:2 (RSV).

⁹ Galatians 4:3 (RSV).

¹⁰ Galatians 4:4-5 (RSV).

¹¹ Galatians 4:6 (RSV).

¹² Galatians 4:7 (RSV).

¹³ Deuteronomy 5:16 (KJV); *cf.* Exodus 20:12 (KJV).

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Development:

The practice that St. Paul cites that is no longer known to us is the complete power that fathers in the ancient world exercised over their children. Usually referred to by the Latin legal term, *patria potestas*, or “power of the father”, that power extended even to putting the child to death if the father deemed it desirable. In our society, in contrast, parents have the power of disciplining their children but that power is limited by the power of the state, acting as *parens patriæ* or “parent of the people”, which can limit or forbid parents from imposing on their children those punishments that the state deems excessive.

It is because of this ancient principle of *patria potestas* that Paul is able to say, “I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate....”⁷ Even the eldest son, destined—if he lived—to inherit the family’s entire patrimony, had, during his minority, no personal rights. He was, as Paul said, “no better than a slave” until he had reached legal adulthood and, with it, adult freedom.

This brings us to another institution, one that has survived in part but has also been extinguished in part. That is the tutorship or guardianship of a child whose father died before that child attained his majority. In our world, the state establishes the age of majority and it applies equally to all children; all that any parent can do, and only a few bother to do, is to delay that child’s inheritance of property by means of some sort of testamentary trust.

It is this to which Paul refers when he says, “but he [that is, the child] is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.”⁸ So our children automatically enjoy full legal rights when they reach the age of 18 or 21 or whatever has been established as the age of full adulthood but ancient children did not receive their emancipation until their fathers gave it to them or until, with their fathers’ permission, they were adopted as the heirs of childless families.

It is with a metaphor drawn from these social and legal facts, well known to all in his audience, that Paul makes his point to the Galatians. “So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe.”⁹ Our corrupted human nature, in a state of nature unable to resist the lures of concupiscence—that is, of the natural “lusts of the body”—is the slave of its passions and passing physical temptations, just as a minor child of that era was the slave of its parents.

However, Paul continues, there is a cure for our state of slavery to sin, akin to the emancipation the minor child will eventually receive from the strictures of its parents: “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”¹⁰

In other words, when we are incorporated in Christ, we are adopted as sons of God and, thereby, become adult subjects of His, responsible for our own choices and behaviors. We are thus emancipated from our bondage to sin and fleshly lusts in the same way that a young adult is, upon his emancipation, freed from the bonds of his minority and tutorship.

This intimate, familial nature of our new, Christian relationship with God is only made possible by Our Lord’s Incarnation, followed by His death and sacrifice for us. So when we are incorporated into Him by baptism and the declaration of faith, these words of St. Paul’s become true for us, as they did for the Galatians: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”¹¹—that is, quite literally, “crying ‘Daddy!’”

Paul continues with his explanation of the effects of this new relationship of parent and child: “So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.”¹² An heir, of course, is a real member of the family, who has real

rights and expectations by virtue of his status, not just some stranger who can expect nothing by right and can only hope for a handout. Still less, Paul implies, is the Christian left like the Pagan whose only hope of receiving anything from his gods is the same as that of a citizen whose city is ruled by a political machine: if he is to receive anything, it will only be what he can bribe some political boss to grant him.

Conclusion:

However, this new family relationship with God is not entirely simple and is certainly not undemanding of us. For if God is now to be truly Our Father, as in the Lord’s Prayer and the three historic Creeds we claim He is, then we, in turn, are obligated to apply to Him at least as much devotion and respect as we are required to give to our earthly parents.

And the minimum requirement for that regard is set forth all too clearly in the Fifth Commandment: “Honour thy father..., as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee....”¹³

That should be a sobering reflection. For, as we sit here today, can any one of us truthfully say that he or she honors our heavenly Father as fully and completely as He, who sent His Son to be born among us and then to die for us, actually deserves?

—oo0oo—

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December 30, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the First Sunday after Christmas, 2012.

² If this Feast falls before Septuagesima Sunday. Otherwise, the appointed Second Lesson is Romans 8:14-21. in which case this particular sermon is inapposite.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).