

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Circumcision of Our Lord

Lessons:ⁱ

First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirtieth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, Called Deuteronomy.ⁱⁱ

“And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, And shalt return unto the Lord thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; That then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the Lord thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: And the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers. And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. And the Lord thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee. And thou shalt return and obey the voice of the Lord, and do all his commandments which I command thee this day. And the Lord thy God will make thee plenteous in every work of thine hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy land, for good: for the Lord will again rejoice over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers: If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the second Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[Y]ou were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

To most of the peoples of the ancient world, the only conceivable relationship they could have with their gods themselves was that of subject and ruler and subject, just like the relationship they had with their political overlords: accepting orders and decrees and paying tribute, always hoping to avoid punishment or the dangerous effects of

capricious anger, such as might be visited upon them by a Joseph Stalin or a Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti, or a Moammar Quaddafi.

Or, since we are using political images, perhaps this could be better depicted by the relationship between an inner-city voter and the ward bosses of a corrupt city political machine such as New York's infamous Tammany Hall. This involved giving outward loyalty, and public support, and occasional bribes, in return for protection and occasional handouts.

The great innovation that God made through His dealings with the Hebrews was His institution of an ongoing, bilateral relationship, in which, on the worshippers' side, the rules were clear, their duties were neither impossibly burdensome nor demeaning, and their benefits were real and continuous. This was because this new and unique relationship was embodied in a *covenant*, that is, a contract or treaty, very similar to an ordinary business contract or the sort of political treaty a victorious high king might enter into with his newly subject peoples.

Theme:

Aside from the various ritual and behavioral actions that marked the people of the covenant from their non-covenanted neighbors, the principal feature of, and distinction wrought by, this new covenant was that the human party to it was not an individual, or even a group of individuals, but was the Hebrew *people* as a whole and as an institution.

In fact, the story of much of Genesis and of all of Exodus is the story of how God chose to create a specific family, which then grew into a clan, which then grew into a tribe, which then grew into a nation, and thus formed that nation out of one man and his disparate descendants. This new and divinely-established extended family was the recipient of the covenant's benefits and for an individual to participate in those benefits, he or she had to be born into that extended family.

Development:

1. Christ has abolished the distinction by blood--that is, by ancestry--between the Jews and the Gentiles and has made all humanity one people under His kingship.

Because membership in the covenant people was by birth into the one extended family, or collection of tribes, that God had admitted to the covenant, all members of that family in good standing were marked by certain outward signs. These included special dress, special dietary observances, a special form of worship, and, for the males of the family, one small, and usually invisible, physical mark. But all of these outward and physical signs were intended to evidence an inward and spiritual reality, namely the dedication of each member of the covenant family to God.

Under the Old Testament version of that covenant, those who were not born into the correct family and who did not bear the appropriate physical signs of that membership could not participate in the duties and benefits of such membership. But with the coming of Christ, that changed: in the New Testament version of the covenant, membership is by personal choice, first the development of faith in the Christ, the Messiah, and then by the decision to follow Him. So now every man and woman on earth can, potentially, become a member of the covenant people.

And where that membership no longer comes by physical birth into a specified human family, but by spiritual birth into a divine one, so the sign of that membership is no longer a physical one but instead a spiritual one: “[At]t one time you [were] Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands....”^v Now water has replaced the knife; baptism has superseded circumcision of the flesh.

2. Christ has worked a reconciliation between God and mankind with His blood, that is, through His one, perfect, and all-sufficient sacrifice of Himself on the Cross.

One shortcoming of the Old Testament covenant, the one marked by biological birth and physical circumcision, was that it had no means of healing the essential separation of humanity from God that is caused

by human sin. All the people of the Old Covenant could do was to acknowledge that separation by their yearly sacrifice of the sin offering, but they could not overcome it.

Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, however, was no mere repeatable offering of the blood of a bull or of a sheep or of a goat, which could symbolize but not eliminate the fact of sin. It was the once-for-all, never-to-be-repeated offering of the Blood of God which, being divine, could overcome sin. It does so, not by preventing sin from occurring, for sadly sin is ever with us, but it does so through God's choosing to disregard our sin, to act as though it never happened, just as a forgiving parent restores an erring child to the good graces of the family:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.”^{vi} So now those who were previously separated from God, both those who were born outside the privileged covenant family and those who were cut off by their own sins, can now be reconciled to that family and accepted by God just as though they had actually been righteous.

3. Christ's purpose in uniting all humans into one body and in making possible the justification of those persons was to make each of us a temple for the Holy Spirit.

Christ did not come among us for a lark or, as the lawyers say, on a frolic and a detour. He had a serious purpose in permitting Himself to be born among us as a baby and in submitting to all of the human experience of growth to adulthood and, finally, of death. That purpose was to enable us, ultimately, to live in fellowship with God.

But making us God's people, and treating us as though we are fit to be such, means that each of us, through Baptism and Confirmation, has received the indwelling presence of the Third Person of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity, that is, of the Holy Spirit. Thus each of us who has joined the people of the New Testament Covenant has become, in effect, a temple in which that Holy Spirit dwells:

“Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in

whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”^{vii}

Conclusion:

However, if we are truly the temples of God the Holy Spirit, then we are called to a divine role and function. But a divine call is also an awesome—in the literal sense, an awe inspiring—responsibility, for those who fill a divine office must behave, must live, in a manner that befits that office. So St. Paul tells the Corinthians: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are.”^{viii}

So St. Paul has told the Ephesians that we are the temples, that each one of us is a temple, the dwelling place, of the Holy Spirit. But do I live in a fashion that makes me prepared to show myself to the world as God’s temple? Do you live in such a fashion that you are prepared to show yourselves as such?

--oo0oo--

The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister^{ix}
January 1, 2012.

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Deuteronomy 30:1-10 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ephesians 2:11-22 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Ephesians 2:12-13 (RSV).*

^v *Ephesians 2:11 (RSV).*

^{vi} *Ephesians 2:13 (RSV).*

^{vii} *Ephesians 2:20b-22 (RSV).*

^{viii} *I Corinthians 3:16-17 (RSV); cf. I Peter 2:4-5.*

^{ix} *Priest Associate, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA; Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune MS; honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*