

Good morning all. Merry Christmas! For many, Christmas has already come and gone. The neighbors are taking down the yard decorations and the stores are running half-price sales on their Christmas merchandise. But since we embrace the traditional calendar, we are only on the 5th out of twelve days of Christmas. We aren't even half-way through the Christmas season. Let's Party! I hope you are keeping the feast going even though it may not be so good for our waistlines. Take it as a personal challenge this week to wish a stranger or a friend, merry Christmas. Now on to the topic at hand.

You will notice in the collect and in the epistle lesson the theme of our adoption by God to become the children of God. In God's grace and patience, humanity was brought to a point of moral and spiritual development through the Hebrews where the redemption of humanity could be initiated. St. Paul in our reading from his epistle to the Galatians refers to this point as "the fulness of the time". He says, "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."

How do we see this maturity in the spiritual development of humanity? We see this in the human relationships around Jesus. First, we see Mary submitting herself to the in-spiriting of God saying to the Angel Gabriel, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word." Mary, in submitting to God's will, risked her reputation, her acceptance by the community, her marriage to Joseph, and her future well-being. She easily enough could have become an outcast. But Christ was born of Mary taking His physical being from her. And God the Father was the actual Father of Jesus for Christ is eternally begotten of the Father.

The other important person in this story is Joseph. No doubt he too was subject to gossip and slander, and always had the impulse to protect Mary as best he could even when he was considering not marrying her because of her apparent unfaithfulness. The Gospel says,

“Then Joseph her husband (*we should read this as ‘her betrothed’*), being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.” But Joseph listened to the Angel of the Lord and took Mary to be His wife. He too submitted to the will of God, not only marrying Mary, but also adopting Christ to be his son.

Christ, in order to be our full representative before the divine justice, submitted Himself to all things that a human experiences. Christ became the son of Joseph, he was a son of the law, and fulfilled the human and divine requirement as entailed by the word “son”. He became subject to His earthly father in obedience to the will of His Heavenly Father.

Our Galatians reading this morning points out that every heir is little different than a servant until the kingdom is passed down to the heir at the time appointed by the father. There is a time in every son’s life, and perhaps differently in every daughter’s life as well, when the child is given the full privileges and responsibilities of an adult ruler of the household. Is this not what all the training, and schooling, and tutoring is about? We need to raise our children so that they will be ready to govern their lives, and, as may be the case, eventually their families, in a healthy and God honoring way.

Now we are jumping ahead here a bit, but do we see an event in the life of Christ that represents this graduation, as it were, from student to master? Recall at the baptism of Christ when the heavens open and the Father’s voice proclaims, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”? This is really the beginning of Jesus’ ministry which is the focus of most of the gospel narrative. From this time forward, Jesus begins to reclaim the world and to redeem us, His people. He exercises the kingship bestowed upon Him by virtue of the fact that He is no longer heir apparent, but that He has come into His kingship. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Let us notice the grand dialog that is taking place in the Christmas story. First, God prepares humanity to receive Christ and the culmination of that preparation is embodied by Mary and Joseph. Then Christ is conceived by the Holy Spirit within Mary. This is, in a sense, a recapitulation of the Creation story for the Holy Spirit breathed life into Adam, and here the Holy Spirit breathes the renewed humanity into Mary who brings forth the new Adam. Next, Mary submits to God in faith and then Joseph does the same by taking Mary to wife and adopting Christ as his son. Finally the true Father is revealed and the Son begins the work of taking back Creation.

We see here the structure of all worship. God initiates sending the Word. Mankind responds in faith to the Word. Salvation and Redemption are accomplished through the Word. This is also the basic structure of our liturgy. When we gather, we hear the Word read and proclaimed. We respond through the creed, through prayers, and through our confession of sin, and then our salvation is proclaimed through absolution, through our spiritual ascension into heaven, and through our union with God.

And I remind you again, that union with God is our ultimate end. The Apostle Paul highlights this in the Galatians passage using the image of adoption. We had been subject to the law, we were sons of the law. The Jewish rite that we've heard of is Bar Mitzvah which literally means "son of the law". This is our standing without Christ. We are under the law and by it, we are condemned. And when Christ enters into the world, He too is under the law, but instead of being condemned by the law, He is justified by the law. He lives as the righteous man, the new Adam, and He therefore truly is Our Savior.

Joseph and Mary received Christ in faith, and through Christ they are adopted into the family of God. We, those who have been baptized into the Body of Christ through faith, are also adopted into the family of God. Christ is The Heir, but we have become fellow heirs with Him and in Him. We are no longer condemned by the law, but we have become freed from

the condemnation. We, being in Christ, are justified with Him.

Now we must always be careful here. We aren't adopted out of the law meaning that the law, particularly the moral law, no longer applies to us. Being adopted into God's family so that we become the children of God means that we now answer to a higher law. It means that we become united to the higher law of love. Obedience for us is no longer completely comprehended by a list of do's and don't's. Rather we wish to please the Giver of Life, the Creator. We wish to follow the new commandment that Jesus Christ gave on the night in which He was betrayed. "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." Our law is to love as Christ loved.

This Christmastide, let be reminded once again of His love. It is easy, during this season, to reduce the love of Christ to sentimentality and warm feelings, but we must not do that. The hallmark card pictures of the stable are compelling and point out the beauty of God's divine gift of love, but let us not forget the reality of life for humanity 2000 years ago. The stable was dirty and smelly and unsanitary. Maybe it had some clean hay, but it was far from comfortable. The grotto at the Church of the Incarnation is a musty cave. Yet these are the conditions in which the Son of God entered into our world.

Christ humbled Himself in the Incarnation far more than anything we can imagine. We may understand in our minds that the meek shall inherit the earth, but Christmas helps us to understand just exactly what meekness is. God became man, being born to the lowliest of peasants, but lowliness in the world's eyes does not equate with lowliness in God's eyes. The holy family become for us the highest examples of faith.

Christ submits Himself to God and is born in a stable, enduring suffering to live the perfect life of love. Mary and Joseph submit to God's will for them enduring the trials that all who love our Lord and Savior Christ will face. And here this morning this is our calling as well.

2024-12-29

The First Sunday after Christmas Day

K. Bartel, 5

Receive Christ. Come to the stable and worship and adore Him. Follow Him over the next months to the cross. Exalt with Him in the Resurrection. And ascend with Him to reign in the heavenlies. May the life of Christ transform our lives. May we embrace our adoption into the family of God. And may we learn to truly love each other as Christ loves us.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.