

Sermon for Christmas Day (II)
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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Today is the Mass of Christ. Perhaps more pointedly than any other feast of the year, Christmas presents us with the question: “Who do you say that I am?” All the rest of the church year presupposes the identity of Christ and celebrates what he does. But today is simply the Mass of Christ. Today is the day specially set aside to tell each other the story of who Jesus is. The eternal second person of the Holy Trinity came to us as one of us. God had so much humility and love toward mankind that he “emptied himself” and came to us as a child, and experienced childhood like other children did.

But we get lazy. We end up tying the childhood of Jesus to our own romantic notions about childhood. We celebrate the cuteness of the baby Jesus, as if he were a toy doll. The angel choir becomes a crowd of pretty girls sashaying across the sky. The shepherds have fortunately washed behind their ears recently, so they can make a polite social call at the manger. We say, “Christmas is for children.” And we assume that there is no challenge here for us grown-ups. Even we “traditional” Christians can be caught in this trap. It is simply easier to go this way. It takes less work than constantly bucking the culture and maintaining the robust freshness of the story.

Into this difficulty bursts our reading from Titus. It may seem a little strange to mention the sacrament of baptism on Christmas, the “washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit”. Baptism may not be the first thing on our minds today, but it does seem to be connected in St. Paul’s mind. He says, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared [That’s Christmas.], he saved us by” this washing. Evidently, if Christmas is about the identity of Jesus, it must also be about our own identity. If we are “marked as Christ’s own forever”, then our own identity is connected to his identity. Who we are and who he is are inextricably bound together.

So let’s attack the question of our own identity first. The purveyors of revision and infidelity in our church like to think of baptism as the only thing that binds us together in the body of Christ. I can only surmise that they like to think this way, because it removes them from responsibility to

any moral norms and allows them to participate fully in our pagan culture as well as in the church. It separates out the measurable content, while leaving the emotional comfort of “religion” available to anyone without any commitment or cost.

But the New Testament knows nothing of this sort of empty shell masquerading as the Christian faith. It is exactly this sort of worship of our emotions (among other things) from which God saves us through the bath “poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior”. The washing here is not simply water as the sign of baptism, but the transcendent reality to which the sacrament itself points and in which it participates. According to St. Paul, this is taking a bath in the Holy Spirit. And he says it is the washing that brings about “regeneration and renewal”.

These words are the kind that roll past us without much impact. We have heard them too many times without thinking about what they mean. Regeneration is being reborn, starting over with a new life. And this word “renewal” means to become totally recreated, to be made something that we have never been before. So what is it that we have become, if we are allowing God to wash us in the Spirit of Holiness?

We have become people with a high destiny. Through this rebirth and recreation, as we allow God to save us and wash us, we become people who are made righteous. That’s what St. Paul means by “justified”. We also become people who are heirs, the rightful inheritors of something, people who can rightfully expect to receive a certain property. And that property is the hope which comes of living the life of the kingdom. We are saved and washed “so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life”.

Now let’s turn to the question of Jesus’ identity. We have heard the passage from the second chapter of Luke so many times that we tend to no longer hear it. We hear our own impressionistic memory of it as we read. Our minds skip over certain portions so that we really only get highlights: went to Bethlehem, had the baby, no room, angels, glory of the Lord, fear not, swaddling cloths. And we think, “Isn’t that nice.”

Well, no. It isn’t nice. When the angel appears, the shepherds are “filled with fear”. Think about a time when you were *filled* with fear. And then consider the angel’s message. Not the message as you remember it, but

the parts that we tend to forget, like “Christ the Lord.” It’s all well and good to have a savior to save you from a predicament. But this savior is “the anointed one, the master”. This savior requires something of us. He is here to save us from the predicament of being ourselves.

And that’s where it all starts to rub, doesn’t it? It’s nice to be an heir, until I find that this also means that there is a master who requires my service. The fact is, in my sinfulness, I am not really so far from where the enemies of God are. I don’t really want to be washed. I don’t really want to be made into something that I’m not already. I don’t really want to be made righteous. I don’t even really want to be an heir. At least there is a part of me that doesn’t, because it’s all too much responsibility. It’s work. And it’s painful. And it means I don’t get to be in charge.

But in our reading from Isaiah, we find that being the heir also includes a close loving relationship with the Master. Those of us who allow this child to wash us and command us are called “the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord, sought out, not forsaken”. In spite of ourselves and our unclean desires, God will not forsake us. He lies there, wrapped tightly so he does not cry, showing us by his humiliation that he is not only the master who requires everything from us, he is the one who has given everything that we might be whole.

So the pieces of us that have been washed already, the tiny crevices into which the Holy Spirit has flowed, those shards of our true selves compel us to joy. They do not celebrate the cuteness of the Christ child, nor the romance of childhood. For real children never feel elegiac about being children. The real children are the people who still know that they need a master, that they need someone who is in control, because they aren’t.

Those tiny pieces of us that have been recreated, heirs in the hope of eternal life. Those shards of our true selves that have been reborn as real children of God. Those pieces celebrate this baby as Lord and Master, yet one of us, faithful and demanding. And we strive to allow him to cleanse us more fully.