
Born to Be Christ-like

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Christmas 1 – Year C

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. John 1:12-13

What if being a person of faith were as natural as breathing? What if we could just assume that we would be righteous and good and loving, and didn't need a code or law or rules or disciplines in order to achieve righteousness or holiness?

Well that notion reminds me of that poem about the naturalness of animals by the 19th century American poet, Walt Whitman. We've had animals in our songs and prayers already today: in our Psalm (147) and in our hymn where we sang about the "ox and ass [who] before him bow"—bowing before the Christ child lying in that manger scene depicted in most of our churches this past Christmas eve (Hymn 107, "Good Christian friends, rejoice").

But before I share the Whitman poem about animals you should be aware that I'm reverting just now to my Baptist roots by organizing this sermon with 'three points and a poem.' That's the formula I learned when I was growing up for delivering a standard Baptist sermon—three points and a poem. So now you're properly advised in advance as we hear this poetic tribute to animal spirituality.

I think I could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and self contained;
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition;
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins;
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God;
Not one is dissatisfied—not one is demented with the mania of owning things;
Not one kneels to another, nor [to] his kind that lived thousands of years ago;
Not one is responsible or industrious over the whole earth.

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/20384-i-think-i-could-turn-and-live-with-the-animals>

What I love about that poem is its robust affirmation that animals are spiritual beings in ways that directly contrast with our human spirituality. "Not one is dissatisfied—not one is demented with the mania of owning things; Not one kneels to another ... Not one is responsible or industrious over the whole earth." I love the serene being-ness that the poet celebrates, versus the doing-ness that occupies our human existence. And yet poets cannot be allowed to have the last word on what it means to be human. On the one hand I require poets because they also open up for us doorways to transcendence. But to go through those doorways and to inhabit the worlds beyond requires more than poets can say or sing, I believe.

For being human is a project. It is a project that requires us to go beyond our animal cousins and thus engage in categories

like responsibility and industry, duty and ownership and—yes—to worship by kneeling to another reality that is greater than ourselves; whether we call that reality our ancestor or God or Higher Power or the Force. Now it's that kind of transcendence that brings us back to church Sunday after Sunday; the transcendence that goes beyond our human will and seeks a divine will. That's the transcendence that our gospel for today invokes when it proclaims that

to all who received [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13)

This capacity or destiny to be born of a divine will is also what St. Paul envisioned for us in today's reading from Galatians. To the Galatians Paul said it in two ways, as you notice when you look at your scripture insert there. You notice that we've divided today's reading into two parts: a portion of Galatians 3 and a portion of Galatians 4. Here's the first version in Galatians 3.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian. (Galatians 3:23-25)

"No longer subject to a disciplinarian"—Wow! Whenever I meditate on that verse I have flashbacks to my schoolboy days in boarding school where I learned to be "subject to a disciplinarian." I felt disciplined especially in learning Latin but also in learning how to swim, and then learning my scholarship job as a waiter and even taking voice lessons in our music program. Because it was an all-boys academy we had formal dances when girls from not too far away were bused to campus and I learned the discipline of being paired with a date for the evening and how to behave myself with a stranger of another gender as if I hadn't grown up around females all my life before.

"But now—" as St. Paul interjects in that passage offering welcome relief: "But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian." My Lord, and what a relief it can be! No longer under pressure to perform what one or another according to some external guidelines but instead to relax into being whatever or whoever we are ready to be anyway. That's what "faith has come" feels like when we finally get to it in today's reading from Galatians. "But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject" or subjected but free to be as we were meant to be; that's how I hear that passage today.

And of course that phrase, "now that faith has come" evokes our Christmas theme for this First Sunday after Christmas: 'Now that Christ has come into the world' we are free to be Christ-like ourselves. That's why we pray our Collect or opening collective prayer appointed for today:

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord ...

(The Collect for the First Sunday after Christmas Day)

Yes, we pray, may we too be Christ-like or like that light who has come into the world with the birth of the Christ child among us.

And that of course leads to the second half of our reading from Galatians today—Galatians 4.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children ... you are no longer a slave but ... also an heir, through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

'No longer a slave under law but an heir through God!' Well I don't know about you but I feel tremendously liberated by that declaration of faith. Right here what St. Paul meant by being "an heir through God" is that we need no longer be tutored or disciplined under the custodianship of religious laws and teachings—as if we have to strive to attain or achieve some alien spirituality. Instead we are now free to be who we were called or created to be as divinely appointed heirs on earth.

Well that declaration leads to our gospel reading appointed for this First Sunday after Christmas. Before recalling it however please notice what happens with our gospel reading and the other scriptures every year on this First Sunday in our Christmas season. While our Roman Catholic and Lutheran and Methodist brothers are celebrating today the Feast of

Jesus, Mary and Joseph as a Holy Family, were observing alongside that celebration our own induction as a holy family into becoming Christ-like children and heirs of God ourselves.

The gospel appointed in our sister churches is the story from Luke (2:41-52) where the 12-year-old boy Jesus slips through the supervision or custodianship of his parents, Mary and Joseph. It's that classic story about their losing him for three days of anxious searching during their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. And already of course the story may remind us of Paul's declaration to the Galatians: that through Christ's coming into the world we too have 'slipped the traces' of our custodians under religious laws and their tutelage. But in the case of the boy Jesus there's something equally significant. He had not just escaped the supervision of his parents but he is found doing what comes naturally for one who is called as we are to be "heirs through God;" found in the temple learning and conversing about matters of faith and spirituality along with the teachers and elders.

Church family and friends, we too are called to found in temples of spirit and grace, doing what comes naturally for those who are likewise called to be "heirs through God." And it's in that connection that our gospel reading climaxes our Episcopal or Anglican observance of this First Sunday after Christmas:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:14, 16).

Thus we here today are invited to be found in our temples of spirit and grace and doing what comes naturally for those who are likewise called to be "heirs through God." Thus I exhort you in these twelve days of Christmas and into the Epiphany season beyond to enjoy a festival of learning and feasting in the spirit of the season. Let yourself discover a natural spirituality of Christ-like behavior and practices that are not a matter of dutiful discipline but rather of freely engaged exploration.

Explore therefore what it would mean for you to be Christ-like in this season and inheriting that character and call that God has in store for you as we continue to live out our Collect appointed for today. Let's pray it again together as we conclude this service of the Word and prepare to transition to our sacrament of the Lord's Table. (You'll find the Collect as the first prayer on the front of our service leaflet.)

The Lord be with you ...

Let us pray together:

The Collect for the First Sunday after Christmas Day

Almighty God, who hast poured upon us the new light of thine incarnate word: Grant that the same light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**