

**MORNING PRAYER
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
01.13.19**

From the Second Lesson: “Giving thanks unto the Father, who has qualified us meet to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

When the Revised Standard Version gives this passage as “He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness”, what it is referring to, of course, is that He has rescued us from Satan’s power, which is Satan’s ability to tempt us into sin. Thus St. Paul explained to King Agrippa what, the risen Christ had told him on the road to Damascus, the risen Christ had told him was his new commission as an Apostle: “to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

This is one of the most basic doctrines of Christianity: that through Jesus Christ, God has given us His power to resist Satan and overcome our bondage to sin. Yet as often as we hear this repeated in Church, it is something that, as soon as we step outside the door after the service, we tend to forget. How often does one drive out of the church parking lot, presumably in a state of grace, yet as soon as one turns into the street, something about which one is idly thinking, or something some other driver does, snatches one’s mind back into the hostile, judgmental attitudes of the weekday world?

That is just an illustration of how seductive this world and its ruler truly are. Our propensity to get lost in the world's preoccupations and temptations is just part of our inborn tendency to act contrary to God's will for us. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it so beautifully, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us."

This is what we call "original sin", that is, our predisposition to sin that comes to us from our origins. It was the English wit and Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis, who is said to have remarked that original sin is the only doctrine of the Christian Faith that is empirically verifiable, for one has merely to look around one at how people actually behave. Or, as the IXth Article of Religion puts it, "Original sin ... is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man ... whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil...."

But if we are innately inclined to offend God, how can we overcome this defect? The answer is given in today's Second Lesson, immediately following the portion I quoted as our text for this sermon:

"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of his flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven...."

Again, the Articles of Religion put this with unmistakable clarity: “The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God.

Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.”

This is how God has, in the words of today’s Lesson, “qualified us meet to share in the inheritance of the saints in light”, “has delivered us from the dominion of darkness”, and has “transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” because “he has now reconciled [us] in his body of his flesh by his death”.

This is Epiphanytide, the Church’s celebration of the showing of Christ to the nations, in the persons of the representatives of those nations, the three Persian wise men. We are members of those nations, that is, we are those to whom the Son of God was shown, precisely because “he has now reconciled [us] in his body of his flesh by his death”.

There is really only one way we feeble human beings can show our gratitude to God for this gift which is, quite literally, beyond any estimation because it is, again quite literally, infinite. It is, in the words of the “General Thanksgiving” in Morning and Evening Prayer: “that we show forth His praise, not only with our lips but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to His service, and by walking before Him in holiness and righteousness all our days....”

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