

First Sunday of Christmas / New Year's Eve 2023

Gal.4:4-7

Sons and Daughters in the Son

Why is Christmas good news?

There are many good answers to that question.

If you asked St. Paul, though, it wouldn't be long until he said something like he says in Galatians: God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that we might receive adoption as God's children. So that we might receive adoption as God's children. He has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, says Paul, crying 'Abba, Father'.

In other words, the relationship between Jesus and God isn't meant to be a closed thing, which only involves them, and which the rest of us must look at from outside, admiring it. No, that relationship is *open*: the point of Christmas, Paul might say, is to allow other people – you and me – to fit inside it. To have the same kind of relationship to the Father that Jesus does. Though that's not quite the right way of putting it, it's not really that we have the same *kind* of relationship. It's more that we're allowed to share in the *same* relationship. We become God's sons and daughters in God's Son.

That's exactly what St. John thinks too, in those famous words we read from his Gospel last week. Why did the Word become flesh? What was it all about? Why, to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God, who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God. Christmas changes something so fundamental about us that the best image for it is that there's a new birth. A new life has started, born of the Father.

Well, why does that matter? Because of this. The Father is the name for that mystery which we have no adequate words for. We use words like glory and eternity and power and all the rest of it, and we know that they fall short, that they're not *wrong* but just wholly inadequate to the Reality we're trying to name. We have no words big enough, deep enough, to say what God is. We know He is glorious and wonderful and good, but also that he is hopelessly beyond us. We are nothing, next to Him. Everything about us is just flat and foolish.

But there was one human life for which this was not so. All that the Father has, says Jesus in John's Gospel, is mine. I'm the human life which is not flat and foolish, I'm the one in whom all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell. I'm the one whose life is deep enough and big enough not just to point to God, but to *be* God, to *be* God as much as this world can bear. Astonishing claim number one, but joined inseparably – this is all in John 15, you can look at it later – to astonishing claim number two. The Spirit will take all that is mine – that is, all the riches of God, all that the Father has – and declare it you. He will speak within *your* life all the vastness and glory you see in mine. He'll put my oneness with the Father inside you; He'll make you share it.

What John says in his Gospel, Paul says in Galatians.

And though it might sound abstract, it has very immediate and concrete consequences.

So, for instance, Galatians 4 goes on, immediately, to talk about religious anxiety. The Galatian Christians have allowed themselves to be persuaded that salvation hangs upon keeping all sorts of rules, observing all sorts of rituals. If we don't do this, God will be angry, God will punish. And Paul's response is to say, essentially, how, having once seen that you are children of God, that you share Jesus' relationship to the Father, how can you possibly be so hung about rules? How can you not see that glory is just far, far bigger than the rule book? Which is not to say, of course, that rules have no place in the spiritual life – they do. But they've got to know that place, which – whilst important - is very subordinate. The first thing is the glory, the new identity, being sons and daughters in the Son.

So goodbye to religious anxiety. Then look at Romans 8, another passage where this theme of adoption, of being made God's children, is central. Now it's goodbye to fear. 'The sufferings of this present time,' says Paul, 'are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.' What will be revealed? What it means to be a child of God, what Paul calls the glorious liberty of the glory of the children of God. The glorious liberty. If your life is filled with all the fullness of God, if you know with unshakeable certainty that you are headed for a destiny which words like beauty, power, goodness, justice only begin, poorly, to describe, well, what follows? Cancer may threaten, Alzheimers might come for you, there might be all kinds of trouble and distress – there will be, this world being what it is. But in all these things, says Paul, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. If you are a child of God, it is goodbye to fear.

And if that is not stunning enough, how about one of the most challenging sayings in the whole New Testament? If you are a child of God, it is goodbye to sin. Goodbye to sin. That's what the author of 1 John says: 'those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they've been born of God.' Now, that is outrageous, is it not? We know that Christians *do* sin, and sometimes sin most terribly. Indeed, the author of 1 John knew that too, which is obvious from other parts of his letter. But nonetheless, he meant what he wrote here. He's trying to say that there's something about a Christian sinning which just doesn't make sense. That the life which has been set loose in us, which is at work within us, the life of God – glory, beauty, power beyond imagining – just leaves no room for sin. As the carol puts it, *cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today*. Cast out our sin. If this life is at work in us, then sin just doesn't belong.

Which, sadly, isn't obvious yet. Once again, we know that we sin. But what the New Testament tries to teach us is that it will not always be so. We are headed for the glorious liberty of the children of God: one day, there will be no sin left in us. And because that is so, our attitude to sin *now* should be one of absolute intolerance, absolute purging. You have no place in me, greed, fear, pride, lust. Not because I'm scared of breaking the rules, not because God might punish me, but because the life God is making inside me is so ferociously glorious that it will just burn you up. There's no room for you. However powerful and attractive and here forever you seem now, you are the flat and foolish thing. I am on my way to glory, and you are not coming.

Why is Christmas good news? Because we are made God's children, and so it is goodbye to religious anxiety, goodbye to fear, goodbye to sin. We were made for glory incomparably greater, and because of Christmas, that is where we are going.

To God be the glory, forever and ever.

Amen.