

Sunday 23rd December 2018

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Purple



Collect

God our redeemer, who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of your Son: grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour, so we may be ready to greet him when he comes again as our judge; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Hebrews 10:5-10 English Standard Version (ESV)

Christ's Sacrifice Once for All

10⁵ Consequently, when Christ^[a] came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’” ⁸When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Footnote: a. Greek *he*.

COMMENT: The message of this obscure passage indicates that Christ was born to die as the sacrifice for the sin of the world. In our modern celebration of Christmas, we tend to neglect this all important aspect of our faith: the Easter story begins at Christmas. The passage quotes Christ, but in reality it is a quotation from Psalm 40:6-8. That psalm is a song of praise for God’s help and has no messianic connotations at all. However, this excerpt does echo the prophetic messages of Micah 6:6-8 and Jeremiah 31: 31-34. The point of this interpretation is to lift up the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, which God willed, as vastly superior to the repeated sacrifices of Israel’s temple ritual. The Christian doctrine of sanctifying grace which enables us to be obedient to God’s law of love finds its simplest definition here. The interweaving of the Old Testament and the Gospel also stands out in this passage. Both testaments are essential elements of a mature Christian faith as both testaments tell the same story of God’s redemptive activity for the restoration of

God's creation - and all of humanity as part of creation - to its proper relationship to God. This is what the author of Hebrews means by his use of the word "sanctified" The Greek word is 'hagiazō' (trans. "to make holy"). The only way for us to be made holy is in relationship to God who alone is holy. The claim of the author of Hebrews is that, according to divine will, only through faith in the sacrifice of Christ is this possible. There has been a widespread misunderstanding that some Christians emphasize only personal holiness. Such a limited view ignores the significant leadership of many 19th and 20th Century evangelicals as William Wilberforce, Anthony Shaftesbury, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhard Niebuhr and numerous others that to be fully expressed holiness must include the whole social order and all cultural systems. Even John Wesley in the 18th century regarded sanctification as incomplete as long as society remained unchanged by converted Christian men and women. Accordingly, the celebration of Advent and Christmas must include not only a genuine concern for the poor and disadvantaged, as in the original legend of St. Nicholas, but also a witness to God's will that the reign of God be established in all human relationships and social institutions.

Luke 1:39-55 English Standard Version (ESV)

Mary Visits Elizabeth

1³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah,⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit,⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[a] a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the

rich he has sent away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Footnote: a. or *believed, for there will be*

COMMENT: The story of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, John the Baptist’s mother, has an air of immediacy and intimacy about it. Some have speculated that the story came from Mary herself. On the other hand, the birth narratives of Luke 1 and 2 are more likely oral legend and poetry which may have circulated as a separate collection long before the gospel was written about AD 80-90. The story as it stands gives some very natural insight into these two women’s experience. They rejoiced in each other’s pregnancy. They needed each other’s support. They realized how blessed they were to be bearing God’s miraculous gifts to humanity. What modern mother who willingly and intentionally bears a child does not sense the same joyful hope that they felt? Mary’s Song, known for centuries by its Latin name *The Magnificat*, was almost certainly modeled on Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. But that the circumstances of that source are more closely parallel to Elizabeth’s, who like Hannah, conceived late in life. Most likely Luke or his Jewish source composed a typical hymn of praise based on Hannah’s prayer and other Old Testament references. (verses 49-50 cf. Ps. 103:17; 111:9) These were adapted to fit this situation, a common practice of New Testament authors. As it stands, the psalm promised the social justice of the messianic age for which the world is still waiting in hope. However they may have come into being, these passages conveyed the faith of the church, then and still, that in Jesus, God who loves the world came to bring all creation into a living relationship with God now and for all eternity. This relationship extends to every human activity and institution as well as to each individual. The Incarnation and the Resurrection had but that one purpose: the redemption of the world through the spiritual resources made available through faith in Jesus Christ, born of Mary.

Psalm 80 *Qui regis Israel* Grail Psalter

℟ God of hosts bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved.

¹ *For the Choirmaster. Intoned like “Lilies of Testimony.” Of Asaph. A Psalm.*

² O shepherd of Israel, hear us,
you who lead Joseph’s flock,
shine forth from your cherubim throne

³ upon Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh.

O Lord, rouse up your might,

O Lord, come to our help. ℟

⁵ Lord God of hosts, how long
will you frown on your people's plea?

⁶ You have fed them with tears for their bread,
and abundance of tears for their drink.

⁷ You have made us the taunt of our neighbours,
our enemies laugh us to scorn.

R God of hosts bring us back; let your face shine on us and we
shall be saved.

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: Another plea for the restoration of Israel's relationship with God is offered in this psalm. Once again, the ancient covenant between God and Israel gives hope to God's people.

Short Preface

And now we give you thanks because you sent him to redeem us from sin and death and to make us inheritors of everlasting life; that when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may with joy behold his appearing, and in confidence may stand before him.

Post Communion

Heavenly Father, who chose the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of the promised saviour: fill us your servants with your grace, that in all things we may embrace your holy will and with her rejoice in your salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Blessing

Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you, scatter the darkness from before your path, and make you ready to meet him when he comes in glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**