

Fourth Evening Prayer of Lent

Bulletin

'So that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.'

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When I was young, the atonement, that is, how our sins are forgiven, was often described in the following manner:

Imagine that you are in court to be tried for a heinous crime that you did, in fact, commit. Witness after witness is called up by the prosecution, the Accuser, to testify against you, and evidence upon evidence is heaped up to make a case condemning you. Your crime is undeniable. The prosecution only speaks the facts. The jury leaves the room to deliberate, only to return in just a few minutes with a verdict of 'guilty.' The judge hears this decision and declares the sentence: death.

You stand and weep; even gnash your teeth. Yet then a strange and wonderful thing happens. The judge rises from his seat and goes down to where you mourn. He pushes you from your desk and away from your attorney and takes your place, himself accepting the punishment, and himself being carried off by the bailiff to be held in prison until his execution.

It is a touching way of understanding God's work for us. It shows how much we deserve hell, and demonstrates the extent to which Christ loves us, that He would take our place, and bear the sentence that we had coming.

The only problem with this image is that it is a travesty of justice, for punishing the innocent to release the guilty is something less becoming of God, and more becoming of a Franz Kafka novel, and of the Pharisees, who *cry for Barabbas*.

But if such a judicial trick did not take place in the heavenly judgment seat, how then, we must ask, is it that Christ's innocent death be counted as our own punishment?

It is not too difficult, if we will hear the Scriptures.

For we are prone to think that just because we have our own mind, our own memories, and seemingly our own bodies, we are our own person, completely independent, and separate from all others. Yet this is not so obvious. We are merely made from the bodies of our parents, with a mind formed by their speaking to us incessantly from our birth, gaining memories for much of our lives from experiences had at our parent's own discretion. Everything we have is simply borrowed from, derived from, drawn from, our parents, who have only what they have because they too drew it from their own.

It is simple pride and selfishness that causes us to believe that just because we are spatially divided from our parents that we are distinct from them, as if distance between two keys on the piano rendered them separate instruments. For the rest of our lives we will replicate their habits, be told that we have our father's or mother's eyes or chin or ears, that we have the same mannerisms or habits of mind. We will even express their same diseases.

It is not that we inherit these things from our parents. We simply are our parents, only projected into the future; the means by which they live on, and not them simply, but their parents before them, projected forever into the past.

The Fathers described humanity as a tree, of which we are merely the twig at the end of a branch. Though the twig can be pointed to as its own thing, it is nonetheless merely the furthest tip of a branch, which is again but an extension of a tree: and that tree is Adam.

For this reason, Israel bears its title, not because the nation of the Jews was named after its father Jacob, but because it simply *was* Jacob, only Jacob as he now is.

And even so Jacob was called a man, even as you are, not because he is one member of a class of many distinct men, but because he simply *was* man, which is what the name of our first father means.

For this reason the Scriptures rightly say that *'by one man sin entered the world, and death by sin; and so death passed unto all men, for all men sinned.'* One may ask, but what about the innocent child, who has never committed any sin?

Another may answer: *'The sin of Adam is attributed to the child, is inherited by him.'* But this is not the case, at least not as we understand it. The child is but a twig, even as you and I: if the tree be struck dead, its bud cannot yet live. If the tree be sick, even the flower is diseased.

This is to say that there are not billions of men, each living their own life, but rather only one man, spreading out into billions of bodies, which we call his children; and as he is a sinner, and condemned to death, so death must come to every part of his corpse, which is you and I. *'Who will save me from this body of death'* cries St. Paul. The body he speaks of is Adam's.

It is therefore justice, plain and simple, that all die with Adam, for Adam is all.

Yet there is a second Adam, a new creation, *born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.* And yet as we are not separate from Adam, so is He not distinct from God, nor from His righteousness, but is *God of God, light of light, very God of very God.*

And yet, *as a lamb going forth to the slaughter,* He chose to become a son of Adam, and in grafting Himself in obedience to the Heavenly Father to the rotting stump of Jesse, He has *been made man*, and in man, all that man is, *a thief, an usurper, a harlot, a murderer.* He is not like the innocent judge who merely takes the place of the convict in the dock to receive His punishment. Rather, *he became sin for us*, even as *he was made man.* And justly will He be condemned.

A cross is prepared for Him, the proper way of dispatching a sinner to the infernal places where they belong, and rightly He will bear it, and bind Himself to it, and climb it, for wretched and wicked is He, O Son of Adam, who first did betray the Almighty and married Himself to that Whore of Babylon, the Father of Lies. And He will suffer a traitor's death, the *shame of the cross*, for such is only just.

Yet Hell will not hold Him, you will soon see; for though according to Adam's humanity, He was condemned to die, yet according to the divine nature, He must live and reign forever.

He rises, having rested for three days, and there He will institute a water, and a sacrament, and a birth; a baptism, by which the Old Adam is killed, that Christ might be born. A rebirth of *water and the word.* For you who have been baptized, you will not live forever with Christ in the presence of the Father, because your

sin has been forgotten.

It is not forgotten at all, but put away, even left in Hell. Rather you shall ascend into heaven, for you are Christ by His eternal grace, the one and only innocent and justified Man, and the only Son of God, and it is only proper that the Son dwell in the house of His Father.

He that knew no sin became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God.

For 'I am the vine, and you are the branches.'

Now the courtroom has changed, but the devil still makes his charge, and calls witness upon witness against you, demanding the maximum sentence. Do you not believe that a sinner deserves such a punishment?

Answer honestly, that he does, and that he must be so punished. And so rise from your chair, and enter into the judge's chamber. If the Accuser protests, allow Him no speech, for he knows not to whom he speaks, for he thinks he speaks to a dead man, a sinner, a murderer, and so you were. But you need not argue with him. Only state the facts.

'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who liveth in me.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.