

DAYS OF MANY NAMES, TIMES OF FULFILLMENT, TIMES OF TROUBLE

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas, 2 January 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

According to the customs of American society, I should have opened this sermon by saying, “Happy New Year”; but the Lutheran theologian, Fred H. Lindemann, has scolded me and all who have read his writings that we should not do that, that the church takes no notice of the secular calendar, and that the church does not celebrate New Year’s Day. If you remember, I often open the announcements before the service on the first Sunday in Advent by saying, “Happy New Year”. However, during the Octave of Christmas, that’s the 8 days beginning with Christmas Day during which New Year’s day always falls, we have many days that have names on the Christian calendar: St. Stephen’s Day, St. John’s Day, Holy Innocents Day, the First Sunday after Christmas, the Circumcision of Christ, the Feast of the Holy Name. Some of these can have two or more of these names for that one day, some because different denominations call them by different names, some only because one of the Saint’s days is on a Sunday as it was this year with St. Stephen, and a Saint’s day takes precedence over the First Sunday after Christmas. January 1st was only called The Circumcision of Christ in the REC, TEC, and the RCC before 1960, when the Romans began calling it “The Octave of Christmas”. Then in 1969, the Romans began calling January 1st, “The Solemnity of Holy Mary, the Mother of God.

According to the Theologian Gerald Bray, this name is an unfortunate mistranslation into English of a word that was argued over at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD. That word was the Greek, Θεοτόκος, which means the bearer of God, as in to bear, to carry, a child. Was she the bearer of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ? Yes, without qualification. Was she the Mother of God in the sense that she pre-existed God? Absolutely not! But this is a side issue for us today.

What we have to look at according to the church calendar is a mixture that seemingly makes no sense according to the ordinary calendar. We go 8 days in ordinary time from the birth of Jesus to His Circumcision and the formal giving to him by His parents (Joseph and Mary) of His Holy Name. However, in between those two days, we have two Saints’ days, the Day of Herod’s murder of the Innocent Children, and possibly a First Sunday after Christmas. Here, time is all mixed up. St. Stephen’s murder took place a year or so after the Crucifixion in about 35 AD. St. John the Evangelist and Apostle died in about 95 AD, but the Slaughter of the Innocents took place about a year to a year and a half after Jesus’ birth.

The church year simply cannot match the exact chronology of the past with the threads of so many lives and events woven into it. What can we say then about these nine days on the church Calendar, from Christmas through today, the Second Sunday after Christmas, whose Propers you heard read earlier? I think we can say that in a way it looks like ordinary life: a procession from the wonderful event of a birth through some good and bad events to another good one. We see a procession from Jesus’ birth, to escape and flight from a bad event, the horror of the Slaughter of the Innocents with the celebrations of Sts. Stephen and John mixed in,

to today when we learned of a return from a land of refuge, to bypass a possible ambush from Archelaus, the son of Herod to return to Nazareth in Galilee so as not to live in the area of suspicion in Bethlehem.

To understand all of these events without being too confused, we need to have read both Matthew's and St. Luke's accounts of these events. If we read only St. Matthew's story of Jesus' birth, we may get the idea that Joseph and Mary were natives of Bethlehem. It is St. Luke who tells us in Luke 2:4 where Joseph had been living: **4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)** So, when we heard in today's Gospel lesson that the angel told them not to go back to Bethlehem, we should not think that that meant that that was where they wanted to live; it could have been just a warning not to go home on a route what will take you through Bethlehem. Bethlehem may or may not have been Joseph's home town some years before; we aren't told which. We just know that he had apparently taken up residence in Nazareth and was working there. Bethlehem was simply the city of David, so that was where he had to go to register for that census. In Israel in that day, they didn't have census workers who came to people's houses; people had to go to them, and they had to go to the right one.

One bit that I read pointed out that as a male head of household, only Joseph really had to go to Bethlehem. So why did Mary have to accompany him? To fulfill God's plan as set forth in the prophecy Micah gave in our OT lesson today: Micah 5:2 **2 But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.** This was the prophecy that scared Herod and caused him to plan the murder of the children of Bethlehem. Why were they told by the angel to go to Egypt and not maybe north to Samaria or east and south to Nabatea? So that the prophecy in Hosea 11: 1 would be fulfilled: **KJV Hosea 11:1 When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.** Jesus' early life is full of events of fulfillment, either of prophecy or of the requirements of the Law.

Yesterday, January the first, is the eighth day if one begins counting with Christmas Day as Day 1. January the first is the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ because it is that eighth day from Jesus' birth; and Jesus, being a descendant of Abraham, must fulfill the requirement of God's Covenant with Abraham, part of which is expressed in Genesis 17:9-12 **9 And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. 11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. 12 And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed.**

Jesus' life was a life of fulfillment, of fulfilling prophecies, and the requirements of God's Covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David, of fulfilling the requirements of Law, which sometimes did not even seem to apply to Him. His Baptism fulfilled a requirement directly from God for the members of the tribe of Levi that they be ritually cleansed before they could begin

work as Priests in the Tabernacle or later in the Temple as described in Numbers 8:13-15 13 And thou shalt set the Levites before Aaron, and before his sons, and offer them for an offering unto the LORD. 14 Thus shalt thou separate the Levites from among the children of Israel: and the Levites shall be mine. 15 And after that shall the Levites go in to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation: and thou shalt cleanse them, and offer them for an offering.

But Jesus is of the tribe of Judah and not of the tribe of Levi, and He is greater than all the Levites as David attests in Psalm 110: 4 and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews in six different places, one of which is Hebrews 5:8-10 ⁸Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him; ¹⁰ Called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec. We know very little about Melchizedek except what we can read in Genesis 14:18-20 ¹⁸ And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. ¹⁹ And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: ²⁰ And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all. Melchizedek could be a theophany, an appearance of God in the form of a human, just as in the appearance of God as one of the three men that came to Abraham's tent. Look at what IS in this short passage. Melchizedek is the king of Salem, the early name for Jeru-salem, where Salem is the early Hebrew word for *Peace*; he is the King of Peace. He was *the* Priest of the Most High God, the only one. He gives Abram (Abraham) bread and wine (Holy Communion), and Abram gives him a tithe (a tenth) of all the spoil of his victory over Chedorlaomer. Types and exemplars are being given here.

And so, on Christmas Day, we have the birth of the most important person to ever be born, live, and die on this earth. On the eighth day after that birth, He was circumcised, and on that day, in that ceremony, He was formally given His Name, Yeshua, ... Jesus, as the angel had told Mary before he was conceived, ... given the name above all names, the name that St. Paul tells the Philippians in his letter to them at Philippians 2:10 ¹⁰ That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; He was taken to Temple and given to the Lord as was required of all first-born. Some time later, the Gentile wise men came to see Him; the Holy Family fled to Egypt. Herod killed the children in around Bethlehem that were two years old and younger. When Herod died, an angel told them to return but not to Bethlehem, and so they came back and went north to Nazareth where Joseph had been before the census was called.

Jesus' early life was like the early life of most people, times of fulfillment and blessing, and times of trouble. That is what our lives are like too.

For us, Christmas has come and passed; it is usually a time of blessing and fulfillment. Now, in this week of the Biblical ups and downs of Jesus' life, it has been so for us as well. For us the weather has been a mixed blessing. We have received much water that will be stored in the snow in the mountains for next summer when we get very little rain. But to have received so much snow in so little time imposes hardships on us, of having to shovel it or plow it or wait for

someone to come and plow us out, and all this snow was followed by this extreme cold. It has been a time of blessing *and* affliction.

We live in a time in which we tend to think that all troubles and afflictions should have a human solution, i.e. man can solve any problem: that the cold weather can be endured by a man-built house with a fire in a stove; that any illness can be cured with a pill or a shot. And so people today are turning away from God in droves. They think God is no longer needed. There has been a spate of articles recently on this topic: People are abandoning religion – the Christian religion for a fake spirituality, and at the same time, Christian preachers are not preaching and teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One quote in one by Bill Muehlenberg, an Australian Christian really struck me. Muehlenberg quotes Leonard Ravenhil:

“I am sick to death of the so-called Christianity of our day. What’s supernatural about it? When do people come out of the sanctuary awed and can’t speak for an hour because God has been in glory there? Dear God, as soon as they get out, they’re talking football, or sports, or something, or there’s going to be a big sale downtown somewhere. We are not caught up in eternity.”

Another by George Orwell, the author of 1984 said this: *We have sunk so low, the only thing left for intelligent men to do is repeat the obvious.*

What is obvious is that we don’t exercise our faith; we don’t pray regularly as we should; we don’t develop our spiritual muscles. We don’t open our hearts to Jesus Christ. We blame our misfortunes on God. We do not accept the righteousness of God; so we don’t recognize that God does not cause evil or trouble, but He does *allow* it to happen. When it does happen, it is not His fault, but He can help us get through the bad times, the times of tribulation, if we will just pray.

The readings for this week on the church calendar can teach us much about how to handle the ups and downs of our life, secular and spiritual, all those times of blessing and times of tribulation.

As we move from the teaching part of the service to the Celebration of Holy Communion, I should like to close with a reading from Austin Farrer for the Circumcision of the Lord: *When a calendar year comes to an end, we feel cheated. Nothing in fact has been ended, nothing rounded off and finished. The year is not a piece of work completed and done; we cannot hold on to, or possess, what it has accomplished. We have learnt many things, but all our learning seems still to lie before us. We have enjoyed many things, but our happiness has yet to earned. We have served God – how little and we have still to find out what the service of God truly is, and who the God truly is whom we serve. Yet in every moment while time bafflingly slips from us, we are in the hands of Him who is eternal and changes not. Our Christ, the Christ we offer up here, the Christ on whom we feed here, the Christ whose Body we are here, is eternal God as well as changeable man. Our grasp of eternity is small, but eternity grasps, fills, and uses us. For we are the body of an eternal Christ.*

The Body that we comprise is that company of all faithful people, those who ask and for whom we ask, that He may dwell in us, and we in Him. Be not afraid to PRAY for His grace, that we may be with Him and In Him for all eternity.

AMEN!