

Sunday December 29th, 2019
Christmas I

PRAYER: Gracious God, in Jesus you were born of flesh that we might be born of spirit. Let us not, like Esau, be faithless and forsake our birthright. Let us rather be quickened by the spirit that remakes us in the image of the One who was truly faithful.

STEWARDSHIP: The writer of the letter to the Hebrews gives us sound advice when he wrote, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (Hebrews 13:16)

PASTORAL PRAYER: Mighty God, Creator and Redeemer of all that we can behold, we marvel at the works of your hands; works that never cease to fill us with excitement and absolute wonder. O Patient lover of all people, we thrill to the ongoing displays of patience that you offer to us. Your love, grace and patience kindle a hope and confidence in us that no one else can offer us. As you work tirelessly to sustain us day in and day out, we humble ourselves in awe because of your unwavering support. Even though we constantly let you down, you have never once failed to hold us up.

For all these mighty works we praise your name, O God. But today in this special season of grace we miss most of all to thank you for all the revelation of yourself in the One whose resting places were, first, a manger, and, finally a cross. In Jesus, the very incarnation of yourself in human form you brought low the proud and raised up the humble. In Jesus you became truly and fully human in order that we, through Jesus might finally become truly human.

O God, Jesus taught us so well, yet our living has not always made the world more humane. Our sympathies, unlike his, do not strengthen the weak. Our words, unlike his, do not condemn the proud. And our deeds, unlike his, do not honour the claims of justice.

We have not become a mirror of Jesus as he became a mirror of you. We have distorted the vision of what you intended for your people to look like to the world and in the process, we have made it more difficult for people to see Jesus in our reflection. For this betrayal-of him, of you, and of ourselves-we come before you with broken and contrite hearts. Forgive us, O God, and renew us, that the humanity that was born in Jesus might be reborn in us today.

Today, even as we celebrate when you joined the human race in Jesus, multitudes continue to sit in darkness and walk in the shadow of death. Millions are starving for want of food. Others are hungry for the very bread of life. We pray, O Lord, that you will make us the channels of your blessing to the nations, whether they need the bread of earth or the bread of heaven.

Christ has come to bring peace on earth and good will to all its peoples. Let us proclaim this good news, today and tomorrow and forever, here and there and everywhere. Amen.

BENEDICTION: God has sent the Spirit of the Child dancing into our hearts. The time has come for our birth. Leap within the world’s womb! Go forth in an expectant world. Do not take with you a cry of pain, believing that you are thrust into the midst of strangers. Take with you a cry of recognition, knowing that you have entered the company of sisters and brothers. Amen.

Sunday December 29th, 2019

Christmas I

Hebrews 2:10-18

“He Understands”

Comedian Soupy Sales tells the story of an old, seedy, rundown gymnasium on the lower West Side of New York that caters to young and old boxers. One day amid the yelling, the smell of fighters sweating, and grunting as the hit punching bags; one of the boxers comes over to his corner after three rounds of heavy hitting and says to his manager, “I really want a shot at the Kid, Kid Jackson. I know I’m getting old and a little punchy, but before I retire, I just want one chance in the ring with him!”

And the manager, wiping his fighter’s face with a towel, says, “Look, if I’ve told you once I’ve told you a hundred times: you’re Kid Jackson!” I think we are all well acquainted with the serious consequences of a boxing career. The neurological damage to a boxer can be quite extreme; as Mohammed Ali’s severe Parkinson’s can attest. The brutality of boxing, and now this thing called UFC or mixed Marshall Arts, is not at all enticing to me. I don’t even like fighting in a hockey game, sorry Don Cherry.

I kind of see this stuff as a sort of modern gladiatorial contest, but without the swords and shields. I do, however, understand why many people enjoy such sport. How, people become enamored with a certain fighter, and follow his or her career, hoping they get a shot at the title. It also explains our fascination with the whole *Rocky* movie franchise, especially the first movie, when Rocky Balboa endures harsh training, (including that unusual scene of him hitting slabs of beef in a meat locker) and a brutal beating by the current champion Apollo Creed.

Everyone, it seems, loves a champion; especially when that champion is our favourite, or represents our school, city, or country. The winter Olympics or summer Olympics prove that to be true. What I find fascinating, is the writer to the Hebrews, in this second chapter we read today, makes reference to Jesus as a “Perfect Leader”. The words “Perfect Leader” sound more like what they use in North Korea for their dictator than for our Saviour.

The problem with this title, however, is that the true intent of the writer was that Jesus be seen more accurately as our “Champion”. In this case, though, Champion, has nothing to do with sports, or athletics. The word champion, in this context, is a military one derived from the Greek Culture; although familiar to all Middle Eastern people. One of the clues to understanding this phrase is in verse 13. “I will put my trust in him.”

In Middle Eastern ancient culture, and in Greek culture, there are numerous examples of a Champion, representing the whole nation in mortal combat. In the Old Testament we have the famous example of David representing Israel in facing Goliath. In Greek mythology, we hear of demigods or heroes, represented whole armies, in settling military disputes. Achilles comes to mind as an example of such a hero.

In the religious mythology of ancient Greece, one famous champion was of course Hercules.

Sunday December 29th, 2019
Christmas I

Hercules was the product of a sexual union between the god Zeus and a woman. He was therefore a demigod. In one famous, and very early recorded story of Hercules, the writer Euripides tells of Hercules locked in mortal combat with death itself, or as Euripides described death, “the dark-robbed lord of the dead.” In referring to Jesus as a champion in this way, the writer of Hebrews seeks to speak to his readers from their cultural context.

Like ancient mythological heroes, or even real heroes like David: honour, glory and reward were won by a sacrificial giving of themselves on behalf of others. Jesus then, is the ultimate hero, as he gave up his divine status, took on humanity, and then wrestled with our greatest enemy in mortal combat. And who is this great enemy, why he is the lord of death, Satan.

I have a new way of looking at those times in the Gospels when Jesus healed someone of a demon possession. The picture of such demonic possession in the Bible, is that of a person completely out of their minds, thrashing about, injuring themselves and others. Jesus is pictured in these accounts as being in mortal combat against his arch enemy. It is a pitched battle over the hearts and souls of mankind.

In Luke 11, there is one such incident that bears some light on our topic for today. Starting at verse 11, we read that Jesus cast a demon out of a man who couldn't speak and immediately he talked. However, the religious critics were there, as always, and commented, “No wonder he casts out demons. He gets his power from Satan.” Besides the comment from the religious authorities being blasphemous, it gives Jesus an opportunity to offer this interesting insight,

Any kingdom at war with itself is doomed. A divided home is also doomed. You say I am empowered by the prince of demons. But if Satan is fighting against himself, how can his kingdom survive? And if I am empowered by the prince of demons, what about your followers? They cast out demons, too, so they will judge you for what you said. But if I am casting out demons by the power of God, then the Kingdom of God has arrived among you. For when Satan, who is completely armed, guards his palace, it is safe-until someone who is stronger attacks and overpowers him, strips him of his weapons, and carries off his belongings.

Jesus describes here, the heart of his mission. Taking on the mantle of the Old Testament picture of God being a warrior, like in Isaiah 49:24-26. Jesus therefore, seeks to overpower Satan. Jesus seeks to take away Satan's weapons and carry off the spoils of the warfare. The spoils being: not gold, silver, or other chattel, but rather, you and I. We are the thing of value in this great cosmic battle.

We may be reluctant to think of our spiritual situation as one of warfare, but that is the true nature of it. The Apostle Paul states this clearly in Ephesians 6:12. “For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms.”

Sunday December 29th, 2019
Christmas I

We are at war, you and I, and we need a champion. And in this great battle, the devil has a great weapon in his arsenal against humanity, and that is according to verse 15, the fear of death. Think about how crippling this fear of death is. In the story of David and Goliath, why did no one offer to fight Goliath before David came? Not even well seasoned soldiers stepped forward to face the giant. They were afraid of death. Fear of death keeps us from achieving our God given purpose.

It is very difficult to fully serve God and to glorify him, if you live in fear. This fear of death is evident all through our culture. We avoid many unpleasant circumstances where our own mortality is made evident. Circumstances like funerals, funeral visitations, hospital waiting rooms and any unpleasant talk about serious medical issues, or legal matters related to wills and power of attorney.

In fighting our mortality, we also talk about how we can “live more”. Retailers recognize this fear of ours. They tell us, like Nike does, “To just do it.” The celebration of youth culture all around us is also a way of avoiding our own aging. Think of all the cosmetic products out there, being bought with billions of dollars, all because they are supposed to make you look younger.

The inevitable approach of death is a huge blow to our psychological health, because it makes us feel hopeless. It fills us with overwhelming anxiety. It steals energy and life from us, so therefore it is also demonic in nature. This fear of death is the weapon of choice the devil uses against us, and our champion Jesus seeks to destroy this weapon.

So, how did Jesus do this? What was his strategy? Well, the writer to Hebrews tells us that what we celebrate at Christmas is the key to the battle. Jesus needed to be equipped to face Satan, just as we would need to be equipped to face our battles. In most mortal combat situations, we would talk of: swords, shields, guns or martial arts as tools of the hero’s trade, but not in Jesus’ case.

None of these so-called tools of war would have any effect on the devil, or his weapon of choice, the fear of death. What we needed in our hero, was someone who was in every way possible, just as human as we are, but with one significant difference; he could not be afraid of death. And what is the major reason we fear death? Surely, at least one reason is that we fear judgment, a giving an account of our lives to our maker.

If our hero against the devil was to have any success at all, they must be free of anything that could be held against them; anything that could lead to judgment. Our hero must also be subject to the same temptations we face, but refuse to give into those temptations. Our hero must also be able to die, as that is our greatest foe; all so he can overcome this challenge.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was well equipped to be our champion. The writer tells us that Jesus was consecrated, or made holy. The power of death, the power of the fear of death, only works when you are afraid of judgment.

Sunday December 29th, 2019
Christmas I

Since Jesus was sinless, Satan's greatest weapon was useless. Jesus was our champion, who broke us free from the slavery of death.

There is even more good news here, because we read that Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. Literally it means, that Jesus "does not blush" to be associated with us. All of us in our experience have at some time been embarrassed to be associated with someone. Maybe this person's character or personality is inappropriate or causes social problems.

To be associated with them, we fear, paints us with the same brush. Their faults and failings somehow reflect back on us if we associate with them. Just as Prince Andrew is in hot water because he was associated with Harvey Weinstein. Because of the victory of Christ over death, we too can be consecrated or made holy. Because of what Christ has done for us, God now has complete solidarity with his people.

These actions of Jesus are also consistent with the character and activity of God. God has always sought to deliver his people from bondage, like in the story of Exodus. And just like in the story of Israel being freed from Egypt to attain their intended purpose, we by the blood of Christ are free to regain our intended purpose. Only God could save us, for only God had the ability and plan to wrestle power away from Satan. And only God can do this if he understands what we experience and the power of the devil's weapon of fear.

It reminded me of what happened in the 1996 summer Olympics. In fact, I think you can see it on YouTube if you want to. An American runner, Derek Redmond, was entered in the 400-meter race. For years and years, he had practiced for this race, with his father as his trainer and coach. During his heat, Redmond was well out in front of the pack when his Achilles tendon snapped.

He stopped running but did not drop out of the race. In a struggling limp he pulled himself forward, dragging his wounded leg behind him. The crowd stood and cheered the wounded runner on, but the pain was so great and the wound so serious that it was doubtful he could make it. Suddenly, a middle-aged man jumped over the guardrail onto the track, caught up with Derek, put his arm around his waist, and helped him finish the race.

This helpful man was of course his father. When the race was over, Redmond told the press, "He was the only one who could have helped me, because he was the only one who knew what I'd been through." And so, the God of heaven comes alongside each of us to carry us the rest of the way. He is the only One who can, because He is the only One who understands what we've been through and what lies ahead.

(Campolo: Let me tell you a story, pg. 15-16)

God in Christ is our Champion. He has won victory over our enemy, destroying his weapon of choice; death. He understands every experience you can possibly have, and he is always there to walk with you through it. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. The hope we now possess, because we have a champion.