

Joshua 5: 9-12

Psalm 32

II Corinthians 5: 16-21

St. Luke 15: 1,3, 11b-32

Lent IV 2022.

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“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, one is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”  
II Corinthians 4: 17

About three weeks after I moved to my first parish, my wife and I bought a puppy from the local animal shelter. “Wycliffe” (as she came to be known) was part-Duck Toller... Apparently, Duck Tollers would be bred and trained to run in circles... Their odd behaviour would sometimes attract birds, for the hunters. Wycliffe the dog exhibited this trait... When Wycliffe was in the woods, she would become so thrilled that she would sometimes run in wide circles – coming back to check on the rest of the family frequently, but then bounding and ranging all around us... She was always part of the Armstrong family pack, but while the rest of us travelled together in close formation, Wycliffe the dog would range out... It sometimes took a little time for her to catch up, to where the rest of us were...

I was reminded of this behaviour while I was pondering the second reading for today, from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians... Paul is crystal-clear that as Jesus Christ *is*, so we *become*. Paul begins,

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him that way no longer. (v. 16)

At one time, Jesus of Nazareth was simply regarded as the pious young man from Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary... But to those who got to know him best, Jesus of Nazareth is so much more! He is the long-awaited Messiah; he is the Son of God and Son of man... Paul’s point is, As we become disciples of Jesus Christ, we develop a deeper and clearer understanding of who Jesus Christ really is – not only a man, but as the Christ, the Son of God...

Next, St. Paul turns his attention from Christ to the followers of Christ... Just as he sees Jesus from a divine as well as a human point of view, Paul recognizes that when we are Christians – when we are “in Christ” – there has been a fundamental *change* in us... We are no longer simply full of natural life; the Spirit of Jesus Christ lives *in us*... We become, Paul writes, “a new creation...” Verse 17: “So if anyone is in Christ, one is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Our spirits become renewed, changed, as we belong to Christ...

Paul explains that this change takes place at our baptism. Romans 6 reads,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. (vv. 3-8)

What about those of us who were baptized as babies?... At the time of our baptism, we don't know anything about Christ... But let's remember this: God always takes the initiative. It is God first. Our human response comes later – sometimes, some time later!... Baptism is one of the sacraments – it is an outward sign of God doing something new in our lives... We have been adopted into the family of God, the worldwide Church family...

So our new life begins at baptism. As we are able, it is expected that we choose for ourselves whether or not to live our lives in light of what Jesus Christ has done for us, or – to choose to turn inward, to our own self-centred priorities...

Elsewhere, Paul writes, “If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's... (Romans 14: 8)

Christians belong to Christ. We don't depend on our feelings to be confident of our position... When we are full of the joy of the Lord, that's a wonderful place to be! But feelings tend to come and to go... If we only look to our *feelings* about whether or not we are Christians, during a good day, we might say, “I feel great today! I must be a great Christian!” However, we all have days which don't go well... We might feel discouraged and tired. If we just look to our *feelings*, we might then think, “Oh, I feel terrible. I must be a terrible Christian.” Nonsense! If we're having a bad day, we're simply having “a bad day.” But tomorrow is another day...

Here is a picture which some people find helpful: Imagine we're walking along a balance beam, or on top of a wall. If we look ahead to the facts of what Jesus Christ has done for us, faith follows, and then feelings. (The good feelings will come along soon enough.) But if we look back, towards our feelings, we will soon fall off the beam or the wall... We look to Christ... Our primary focus is not our feelings at the moment...

So we have this new spiritual life, as we live for Christ within the community of the Church... But, there's a problem: Those of us who are more honest with ourselves might be a little unsettled: “If I'm being honest,” they might say, “I don't think I always act or speak as this new creation. There's still this issue of “sin.” Sometimes I say these *words*...

Oh, I don't want to say what I sometimes say! Or I have this real addiction – some real habit which I want to get rid of, but then – I catch myself doing it, again, and again! Or my friend Kim: I know she's a Christian. But she always has this terrible temper, and sometimes it pours out!..."

So, for many of us – perhaps all of us, if we're being honest – there's a discrepancy between being the "new creation" we know we are, and this persistent problem of "sin," which we know isn't consistent with God living in us... How can this be?...

Let's go back to that picture of Wycliffe as she roamed. She was always part of the family. But there was this tendency to wander, and she would have to catch up. Sometimes it takes a little time – even a lifetime – for our habits to catch up with our new state of being... Compared against the standard of eternity, it's actually less than the blink of an eye. But in the moment, our progress can seem excruciatingly slow...

Take heart! As we belong to Christ, you and I are a new creation. His Holy Spirit dwells in us. We are being prepared for glory – even if our progress isn't as speedy as we would like it to be...

In light of this fact, I would wish for the Church in the West to be far more bold and confident than we so often are. Our confidence is not in ourselves, but in the God whom we serve. I don't believe that the Lord wants timid followers. Let us dare to undertake radical acts of love. Let us dare to build the kingdom of God...

In light of being a new creation, St. Paul mentions two qualities of the Christian life. First, we are called to be "reconcilers." We are called to be agents of reconciliation in a broken world. Above all, we are reconciled with Christ. The old division of sin has been overcome by Christ's reconciling work on the cross... Even more, we are to seek new relationships of reconciliation *with one another* – not to remain estranged, but to bring about a re-joined fellowship, with the help of the Holy Spirit. We are to be reconcilers. Paul writes, "All this [new creation] is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation..."

Lastly, we are to be "ambassadors." An ambassador's first loyalty is to the home country, but he or she lives for his home country in a foreign land... A good ambassador acts graciously and has the gift of hospitality. In the same way, we are ambassadors for the kingdom of God: Our first loyalty is to Christ. But we are living out our terms of office in a different land, a land which doesn't know the justice and peace, reconciliation and love, which we know. We too are to act graciously, and to exercise the gift of hospitality. We are *ambassadors* for Jesus Christ...

May we appreciate even more deeply that we are a new creation in Jesus Christ. In light of this, let's live boldly as agents of reconciliation and ambassadors for Christ, now and for ever. Amen.