

“Regeneration”

Mark 5: 22-34

Proper 8B, Boise, 2021

In our first three readings this morning, we were exhorted to exercise charity toward members of our community who are in need. In the Gospel, we have two examples of the Divine charity administered through Jesus the Messiah, first in the restoration of a daughter of Israel to her former health, and then of a little girl who had died to life. “I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.” This supreme act of God’s charity is something we all have to look forward to as believers.

In the sacrament of Baptism, we have the anticipation of bodily resurrection in the regeneration of the believer, a resurrection of his or her spirit. Little Evelyn’s sponsors, her uncle and aunt, who are members of the Roman Catholic Church, pledged faith in Jesus Christ for her, which we who witnessed the act have accepted as a pledge made in good faith and sufficient to make Evelyn a believer — for the time being. They and her parents, now undertake the solemn responsibility of rearing her in such manner that will give her every opportunity to embrace that faith with her own intellect and will in the years to come, so that it becomes the faith she lives her whole life by.

The baptism of an infant is more than a promise and the expression of a hope that it will be fulfilled. A sacrament is a means of grace, and hence the very instrument of its fulfillment. The means is human: washing with water in the Name of the Trinity; the grace is Divine: regeneration, which is a spiritual death and resurrection in advance of the physical. I will repeat the thanksgiving we made in the rite just administered, which states our doctrine:

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are

made regenerate by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

That the sacrament of Baptism is the means of regeneration, not always but ordinarily, is based, first of all, on Christ's pronouncement to Nicodemus, "unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" [Jn 3: 5]. The understanding of the Christian mainstream has always been that the Holy Spirit is the active agent in the New Birth, the One bringing it about, and that the washing with water, performed by the human minister, is its "outward and visible sign." The grace and its sign belong to a single action — ordinarily. The sectarian reading of Our Lord's statement, held by some groups since the 16th century, is that Christ was talking about two different baptisms, one by water and another by the Holy Spirit. Anglicans swim in the mainstream of Catholic tradition and therefore adhere to a sacramental understanding of Baptism, one that sees the Spirit's operating through matter and human language — by Christ's ordinance.

Hence, we say unequivocally that Evelyn Jeana Christ is born again. She has received Christ's new humanity and its regenerating Spirit, changing the foundations of her being. She now belongs to the race of the New Adam and is no longer of the old, even though the effects of the old will linger until she learns by cooperation with the Spirit to overcome them. And we have every confidence that, with a Christian upbringing and instruction received both at home and in the Church, she will in time learn that cooperation with God that leads to a first repentance, or what many refer to as their conversion — and after that, a public profession of faith, Confirmation, and a life of following in the Master's steps.

St Paul in Romans 6 goes into further detail on the Spirit's regenerative action in a believer, which occurs at the roots of one's being and is hence, too deep to be felt. Only the outward and visible sign of the sacrament lets us know that it has occurred. He begins with a rhetorical question:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life [Rom 6: 3-4].

Our being human is put on a new foundation when it is incorporated in Christ. His death and resurrection begin to work their effect on us, and we begin to breathe with the same Holy Breath that led Him to the Cross and raised Him from the dead. The evil legacy of the first Adam is broken and his guilt wiped away, so that we might live unto God in the second Adam, who is Christ. As Anglicans who take their teaching on Baptism from the mainstream of Christian tradition — a teaching shared by Lutherans, Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and others — we do not think St Paul was writing to the Romans in chapter 6 about something other than the sacrament that was administered to Evelyn this morning.

This marks the beginning of her life as a Christian, yet I remind her parents and godparents that it is only a beginning. For the next several years you hold that life in your hands, and how it develops depends mainly on you and your cooperation with the Holy Spirit. The rest of us are here to help.

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