

CHILDREN WITH A HOPE

Wisdom 12. 13, 16-19

Romans 8. 12-25

Matthew 13. 24-30, 36-43

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

When he received the Spirit at his baptism, our Lord was proclaimed to be God's son. Led by the Spirit into the desert, Jesus was tempted; and later on in his ministry, as he was empowered by the Spirit, Christ exorcised demons.

This same Lord who was marked out as God's son by the Spirit at his baptism cried out 'Abba, Father' in Gethsemane, praying for deliverance from his hour of greatest anguish.

Paradoxically, Jesus's sonship was put on display when normally one would have that it would have been veiled, as he hang on the cross. Yet the centurion cried out, 'Surely this man was God's son!' And God vindicated Christ's obedience as a son by raising him from the dead.

When we come to our appointed epistle text in Romans 8, it is important that we keep all of what I have just said fresh in our minds; because what we learn in this chapter is that the Spirit grafts us into (or enables us to become part of) the story of our Lord. As our lives bear the marks of Jesus's life, we are reminded that we, too, are God's beloved daughters and sons, those with whom God is well pleased, and those who will receive God's glorious and eternal inheritance.

In verse 14 of Romans 8, St Paul writes that those who are led by God's Spirit are marked out as members of God's family. Identity, however, is not just who we are in the inside; our identity is also made known through our actions.

Firstly, we are told that our identity as God's children is made known as we 'put to death the deeds of the body', and no longer live 'according to the flesh' (8. 12-13). This speaks of what we might generally call 'sanctification'; but Paul's language is more evocative, as he makes references to bodies, flesh and death.

The language he uses does not mean that bodies are inherently bad, but reflects the ancient idea that 'physical' passions draw us away from moral virtue.

Paul differs wildly from his peers, however, in his conviction that the way in which these passions are brought under control is not through exercise of reason (as his Roman contemporaries might have imagined); nor through the Torah (as his Jewish compatriots might have hoped); these passions are brought under control through the Spirit of God, as he unites us to the death and resurrection of Christ.

Our 'sanctification', as we call it, is our participation in a startling but true cosmic reality: that God has put sin to death in the body of our Lord. We, who are sons and daughters of the Father and who are led by the Spirit, are therefore invited to ensure that the sinful markers of this age are put to death in us.

Secondly, we are told that our identity as sons and daughters of God is made real in suffering. Verse 16 puts it starkly: we are children and heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, 'if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him'.

Here we have moved from the idea of 'death' and doing away with our shadow self, to 'suffering' that may come in many forms, perhaps most of all in the suffering that comes from living in faithfulness to God.

In early Jewish thought, it was believed that the suffering of the faithful would bring about God's final deliverance. This suffering was actually the 'labour pangs' that would birth to the age to come.

For Christians, however, it is Jesus's suffering on the cross that served the purpose of those labour pangs: and they were not pains that led to death, but pains that signalled a new birth and a new beginning. We, who are caught between the old age and the age to come, are called to join Christ in his suffering, and therefore to participate in the advent of that new beginning.

The life of Christian faith invites us to become part of this important and incredible story which is our Lord's story: not only trusting that Jesus died for us and was raised from the dead, but also trusting that if we enter into his death we, too, will be given newness of life.

If we had ears to hear, we would have learned from the scripture long ago that our destiny is actually intrinsically tied to that of the created order.

For example, when we read the first three chapters of the book of Genesis, we learn not only that humankind was given a role to play on earth, as mediators of God's rule to the world; but also that human failures had all-embracing implications: as a result of sin and rebellion, human relationships were marred and our relationship with God was set askew (Gen 3. 8-19).

In Romans 8, we see that God has not uprooted us from the earth. He continues to allow humanity to stand at the central point of the destiny of creation.

In verses 18-25 of Romans 8, this is the story that Paul tells: creation has a future, and that future is tied to the resurrection life that God is bringing to his beloved children. The identity that is ours by the Spirit (that is, our identity as sons and daughters of God) will be ultimately consummated when our bodies are redeemed and all of creation is ushered into the glory that God first bestowed on Christ, and then on us (8. 18, 21, 23).

God's plan for the world, which was made known in the work of our Lord, includes us, and will not stop until the entire created order is renewed. And so we see that our text in Romans 8, which first began with a call to put to death the deeds of the body, is not about escaping from our bodies or about escaping from the earth; it is rather about becoming more truly embodied people living one day on a flourishing and eternal earth.

If we are the adopted daughters and sons of God (8. 15) - which we are - we then have a hope. We know that our current life is rooted in what God has done through Jesus Christ; we know that we are sustained by his Spirit ; and we know that our future is assured by what God intends to accomplish, not only in us, but in all of the created order. We are indebted to God, who has showered his grace upon us and promised glory to all of his children. As sons and daughters of God, we are joint heirs with his Son, and we will indeed receive the inheritance that has been purposed for us. Do we believe this?

Amen.