

Christmas 1

I take as my text three verses from today's passage of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians:

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy sight O Lord, my Strength and Redeemer.

Just a week ago, we were celebrating Christmas Eve and, while, for the secular world, Christmas is all behind us and attention has been turned to ringing in a New Year and making those New Year's resolutions that so often barely last the day, as Orthodox Christians, we Anglicans are still in the midst of Christmastide. For us, this wonderful holy season lasts at the least until the Epiphany, and may even be celebrated until the Purification of the Virgin Mary on February 2nd.

In this present secular-oriented world, everything leads up to Christmas Day and then it's over for another 12 months.

But that's not the way it is in the Church, among Christians. The story that began with the birth of Jesus does not reach its climax until His Death on the Cross, His Resurrection, and His Ascension. Even then we find that it is a never-ending story, for He lives on through the Church and He continues to watch over the Church from His Throne of Glory in Heaven at the Right Hand of the Father.

What should be impressed upon us during the Christmas Season, and throughout the Church Year, is that the Incarnation of our Lord was a purposeful act. Before Jesus Christ, we were in bondage under the Law; but, when the appointed time came, God sent His Son to be born under the Law, so that through Him we might be freed from that bondage and made heirs of the salvation that becomes rightfully ours as adopted children of God.

Our Lord, through His Incarnation, became subject to human conditions; thus, He became subject also to the Jewish Law. This law was more than just the Ten Commandments, for it encompassed the entire Judaic legal system, the Mosaic Law, defined and redefined, encumbering and impossible to keep; indeed, to be subject to the Law was to be in bondage.

Through His Incarnation and perfect obedience to the Father, even to His death on the Cross, we have been rescued from the sin and evil of this world and freed from bondage under the Jewish Law. Yet this freedom is not without some responsibility and obligation as heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we become baptized into the Body of Christ, we begin a new life. Quite fittingly, it begins with repentance and a complete surrender of self to the will of Jesus Christ as our divine Saviour. Without such a complete surrender, we cannot begin to experience the unique blessedness and power of our Christian Heritage.

In essence, having been freed from the bondage of the old Law, we now bind ourselves freely to our Lord under a new Law, the Law of Love.

Only by this great willful sacrifice, that is, the merging of our will with the will of God, can we be filled with the inward joy of oneness with our Heavenly Father and enjoy a relationship as His adopted children.

What are some of our obligations and responsibilities under the Law of Love with which we must come to terms in this merging of wills?

1. Ready Forgiveness. If we expect God to forgive us our sins — and no doubt we each have been prolific sinners — we must be willing to forgive those who wrong us. No easy task when we are so often reminded of the sweetness of getting even.
2. Avoiding Unkind Criticism. We are so accustomed to being scrutinized and judged by our superiors, peers, and subordinates, strangers and friends alike, that we too form judgments of others and communicate those criticisms, often in unkind manners.
3. Having a Peaceful Disposition. How difficult can it be to get along with others? "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God."
4. Being Benevolent. Perhaps we think of benevolence mostly in monetary terms; even in the Gospels, we find references that could support this concept. Truly, we should by nature be giving and willing to share our abundance with others less fortunate. But giving of ourselves is by far of greater importance than just sharing our material abundance. One aspect of Jesus Christ that made Him truly revolutionary was His willingness to touch those who were considered by Jewish Law to be unclean. For us today, reaching out to touch someone can mean just as much as writing a check or slipping someone a few dollars. Benevolence has many forms.

5. Loving Your Enemies and Persecutors. Now, how many of us can admit to loving our enemies and persecutors? Not easy. For this reason, loving your enemies and persecutors is a distinctive mark of a Christian.

6. Not Resisting or Resenting Injuries. This is an interesting Christian responsibility or obligation and often misunderstood. It's not so much "turn the other cheek" as it is the avoidance of seeking vengeance for being wronged.

This is not an inclusive list, rather more of a sampling; but it does point out the degree of demand placed upon us in accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour and in striving to merge our will with His will.

At midnight on Christmas Day, for the secular world it was over and any more "to do" over Christmas became anti-climactic. Yet, for us Christians the celebration is not over until the 6th of January and longer.

Moreover, for the Christian Church, the tension continues to build over the next few months as we celebrate highlights in the life of our Lord, culminating with that final act of redemption, the express purpose for which He entered this world.

When we toss out the Christmas tree or put it in storage, let's not do the same with our commitment to Christ. The joy we experience at this season of the year is ours to enjoy each day of the year if we bind ourselves to Him under the Law of Love.

As we make every effort to conform our will to the will of God, the task takes on a different perspective when we think about Mary and Joseph; how they responded to a most unusual call from God. Mary, at a most tender age, perhaps 14 or 15, pure, unmarried, accepted God's call to bear a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. The words with which she responded: "Be it unto me according to thy word."

And Joseph, engaged to Mary, is asked to accept her condition unconditionally, to accept a miracle.

Our technological world, its science, computers, and instant access to boundless information, has made us witnesses to many extraordinary things; we have been so seduced by intellectualism and skepticism that we lose sight of the truly miraculous.

We tend to base acceptance or rejection of almost everything on the amount of empirical evidence available, and we even go so far as tending to intellectualize our relationships with each other, not to mention God.

But what makes us human is our relationships, sharing joy, sadness, pain, and pleasure, and most importantly love.

We have come a long way in 2000 years. Today, without the stigma of ancient times, we can reach out and touch someone. We can offer a handshake, a smile, even share a bit of ourselves without being revolutionaries. Remember the example set for us: our Lord reached out and touched the lepers, took the hands of the lame and raised them up, and dined and communed with the outcasts and sinners.

The righteous Jewish leadership of our Lord's day and time could not understand, much less tolerate our His recklessness in coming into physical, even social, contact with the unclean and the sinners. Do we still see that attitude in our own communities today within various social strata?

As, on the Cross, Jesus reached out to others, forgiving and consoling, we, in the comfort of our Christian Communities, have an obligation also to reach out to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Tomorrow is the eve of a new year, and if we are going to make any resolutions, let us first resolve to worship God corporately as often as possible in our little church, as well as privately, keeping alive the Law of Love in our hearts; and let us resolve to strive toward a merging of wills, our will with God's Will for us.

God has set us free from the bondage of sin through His Son Jesus Christ and has made us heirs by adoption to His Heavenly Kingdom; in an act of love we can never understand in our lifetime, He has redeemed us through the blood of His Only Begotten Son, reconciling us to him.

As we have been freed from the bondage of sin, let us now freely bind ourselves to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; let us offer our lives to Him as a living sacrifice in worship, and praise, and thanksgiving; and what a more fitting place than before the Altar from which we are fed and sustained with the Bread of Eternal Life.