

Circumcision of our Lord

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians:

....work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

In the secular world, we have just begun a new year. I imagine that most of us here today also made at least one resolution, generally involving some form of discipline, for the new year, at least one that we will soon break. It's a tradition!

But, how often do we resolve to start the new year with a resolution that directly affects our spiritual well-being, our relationship with God?

The significance of what we celebrate on this eighth day after Christmas – the Circumcision of our Lord – and St. Paul's exhortation in his Epistle to the Philippians together form a basis of resolution and renewal for us.

In the act of circumcision, we see our Lord, even though an infant, submitting voluntarily to what has been described as a painful and bloody ritual. The rite of circumcision for the Hebrews symbolized the putting off of the sinful lusts of the flesh. It was a seal, a mark. It made the person subject to the law. It was a requirement of Judaism, even for adult converts.

Though Christ was without sin, He submitted to circumcision to be made subject to the law; this, He did in order to deliver us from our bondage under the law. Circumcision was our bond through which we acknowledged we were debtors to the law.

Though Christ had no impurity of nature nor had any need for circumcision of the heart; nevertheless, He was made under the law through circumcision that it might be made manifest that He had assumed true and real flesh, for only by partaking of our flesh and blood might He fulfill the law.

This Jewish ritual prefigured Christ's life of obedience and discipline, following the will of His Father, even to death on the Cross.

Yet, we see that under the New Covenant, circumcision of the flesh has been replaced with Baptism, "...the circumcision without hands..."

So here, in the Circumcision of Christ, we see the fulfilling of the Old Covenant in the first shedding of His redeeming Blood, and foretaste of the pain of Calvary; in the Circumcision we see Him being made a child of God through the covenant of Abraham, taking on our sinful nature that he bore on the Cross for our salvation.

With some understanding of the significance of the Circumcision of Christ, knowing that He fulfilled the old Law, having received from Him the new Law, that is the Law of Love; we can come to a better realization of what St. Paul is saying to us when he says "...work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

We know from Scripture that we cannot obtain or procure for ourselves spiritual and eternal salvation by our own works. It is through the Grace of God that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

But, that does not mean that salvation requires no effort on our part; indeed, St. Paul is saying that the opposite is true. He is telling us that salvation is a life-long effort on our part to be made with utmost care and diligence.

Part of that effort is to believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior, and with all honesty and sincerity, put our trust in Him;

We must make an effort to resist evil and temptation, the allurements of the world;

We must make every effort to let our faith show forth in good works;

And we must make every effort to embrace the Law of Love. The role we must play in our own salvation is not to be confused with "good works."

As we have been reminded time and again, we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and not by good works alone. That is to not say that good works are to no avail. Rather, our faith in Jesus Christ will produce works that are pleasing and acceptable to God.

The role we play in our own salvation is living our faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is not passive. It takes effort. We are surrounded by temptation, as the Catechism puts it, “temptation of the world, the flesh, and the devil.”

God’s Grace empowers us to work out our salvation. His Grace works within us according to our own nature, and it is up to us to act upon it.

Just as our physical body, our human nature, depends upon water to live, so our spiritual nature depends upon the “living water,” which is Jesus Christ, to live.

As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well:

“...whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”

Here, again, what we see is actionable: “...whosoever drinketh...” – an action on our part. Jesus Christ offers us the “living water,” and we must make the effort to drink.

Again, we are offered, in the Holy Eucharist, the Bread of Heaven; but we must make the effort to come to God’s Table to partake of that Bread.

As St. Paul has said, we are to “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.”

When we stop to think about it, we do have a responsibility in working out our own salvation.

It’s a two-sided issue: on one hand, God works in us a desire for salvation, while on the other hand, salvation is in our own hands.

There is no doubt that the work of salvation is begun, continued, and ended in God.

But, however much God works to put the desire in us, without our co-operation, God’s work in us will not come to fruition.

Just saying, “I accept God’s gift of salvation” is not sufficient in itself, according to St. Paul. We must of ourselves give continual evidence in our daily lives that we are truly working out our own salvation.

This continual evidence is what we call “effective action.”

“Effective action” is what we do on our part to stay on the straight and narrow road that leads us to our salvation.

One sign of that “effective action” is when we are afraid not of God hurting us, but rather that we may somehow grieve God through our own failings.

Another sign is the peace and certainty that comes when we put our trust in God, and put aside our rebellious nature.

There is also the idea of Christian purity, being without spot of blemish before God, and an example of the Christian life for the world to see. No small task!

We, as Christians, are to be “lights in the world.”

We are to be witnesses; rather more than that, as our lives are to be a witness.

The expectation is over-whelming; yet, all is within our grasp.

In the Circumcision of Christ, we see the fulfilling of the Old Covenant with a New Covenant of Love.

The Incarnation brought mankind into a new relationship with God, and the impossible became possible.

Thus, when we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and accept Him into our hearts, everything becomes possible.