

The Lion

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Saint Mark's Parish, Denver, Colorado*

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The First Sunday after Easter or Low Sunday

A Sermon delivered at St. Mark's Church, Denver
by Subdeacon James Tochihara

From the Fifth Chapter of the First Epistle General of St. John: This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. +

THAT CHRIST came to us by water means that he came by nature from Adam, born of woman as any human being. Now, this is no small thing, because humans are born as the image of God. One of the most profound verses of Scripture is when God declares: Let us make man in our image (Gen. 1:26). My brothers and sisters, this is a prophecy.

Being made in the image of God, human beings possess as a natural birthright a measure of the authority of God. According to the prophecy of Genesis, we were not created merely to obey the natural laws of the universe. Though we obey God, it is our God-given nature to write new laws for the universe.

It used to be a natural law that many humans would suffer from smallpox and die. We re-wrote that law with our vaccines and now smallpox is extinct. This is our calling as children of Adam. It used to be a natural law that humans travel only on the surface of the planet, but we re-wrote that law and now we fly, god-like, through the skies. The Book of Genesis teaches us that innovation and science are part of our nature.

Humanity has always been very clever and ingenious, but Moses, as a prophet, saw that human nature had a limit. According to Genesis, the first Book of Moses, Adam had been born into Paradise, but because of his sin, he suffered death in a fallen world. Where Adam is, there is all of humanity. As long as Adam dwells in Sheol, the Land of the Dead, humanity is tinged with a certain bitterness inside its very nature, a strange inability to produce or achieve anything without tragic flaws, unintended consequences, or sometimes fatal errors. As long as Adam is in bondage to the shadows and twilight of Sheol, the mind of humanity tends toward superstition and fear, dysfunctionality and self-deception, or even violence and annihilation.

When Jesus was crucified, he died and descended into Sheol. He freed Adam from his bondage in that land of shadows, and redeemed him, leading him into Paradise. Just as we are Christ's Body, with Christ as our head, Christians and non-Christians alike are the Body of Adam. That Christ came by water means that Christ came with a mission to redeem and to restore human nature itself, liberating all of us to reach for the stars, literally and figuratively. Think about the world today. There are smart phones and lap tops, MRIs and solar cells, satellites and web-sites. These are the visible consequences of our Lord's redemption of Adam.

Traditionally, we call this the Harrowing of "Hell" (an English translation for Sheol), and you can see it depicted in our Resurrection icon over the baptismal font. Jesus forever altered human nature when he rose on the third day. The curses of Adam were lifted and we were liberated and renewed. It is our Christian calling to invent and to discover—to re-write the laws of fallen nature back to the laws of Paradise. So, when you see any new gadget, any new technology, tell yourself, and tell your children: This is the Prophecy of Adam, which was fully accomplished only by the Redemptive work of Christ Jesus. Anyone who enjoys the comforts of the modern world should know: Jesus went to Hell and back to make this possible. This was Jesus' mission and victory by water.

Our species possesses unlimited potential, and it's our duty to develop that potential in a moral and proper way. In the waters of baptism, when our flesh is purified of sin by the power of the Spirit, the redemption of Adam becomes our redemption in Christ. In order to complete this redemption, Jesus also came by blood, so that the Body of Adam, freed from the many curses of death, might receive the Wisdom of God—and we need this more than ever. We are very comfortable and blessed, and by the will of the Father and the grace of Jesus Christ we shall become even more comfortable and more blessed in the future, but we can't take this for granted.

We've already seen what this blessed state looks like without the blood of Christ's priesthood: Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Maoist China. We ourselves can destroy all human life on this planet with a handful of weapons. We can monitor practically every second of an individual's life, and even expose half of his or her secret thoughts. We can render a family homeless, or deny them much of their freedom, with the stroke of a computer key. We need more than ever the blood of Christ to cleanse our souls of sins, our minds of superstition, and our hearts of fear and anxiety so that we might lead humanity into the future.

In ancient times, many who were considered the wisest of their people imagined Heaven as being just past the dome of the sky, and gave their guesses at what life was like up there. That might seem naive or primitive, perhaps even embarrassing to us, but that image is still true. How different or disorienting is it to be a pilot, or even better, an astronaut? So much of

the familiar earth-bound world is no longer relevant. Going up into the sky is indeed what it's like to enter Heaven, or to enter the future. (And, in a small sidebar: it's no coincidence that this is also what it's like to enter a monastery. I'm afraid it's all connected.) It's new and strange, and frightening, even terrifying to some. This is what it's like to let your faith grow, to let your heart and mind be overtaken by hope and joy, and this is what it's like to let yourself receive the forgiveness and love of God the Father.

It's not enough that Jesus came by water, although we should realize that our Lord did indeed come by water. We don't force ourselves to hide from the world, afraid of science or the future. We are Christ's Church, his Body, and we are called to be the priest-kings of humanity. We must continually purify our souls with the Blood of the Eucharist, so that we might bear witness by water and by blood, bringing the salvation of Christ Jesus to the world. With purified bodies and purified souls, we can march with confidence each new step into the future, each new step closer to Heaven.

So, at this point, a question may have occurred to some: if Christians are all about change, what are we doing in an Orthodox Church? This place doesn't seem to change at all. Isn't this contrary to the Prophecy of Adam? Dearly beloved in Christ, do not be deceived. This temple and this worship are the same temple and worship as David's and Solomon's, the same worship as Moses' and Aaron's—with the exception that they have been purified by the sacrifice of the Cross, elevated by the Resurrection and Ascension, and passed down by the Apostles.

To the ancient Jews, entering the Temple of God's presence was the same as entering the Paradise of Eden (as I like to remind people), but it was also the same as entering the Ark of Noah, that vessel that survived the world dissolving into chaos by the floods of water. Noah and his family survived that experience spiritually, mentally, and emotionally by staying close to the presence of God in the true worship—passed down from Adam to Abel, practiced by Enoch, and kept faithfully by Noah.

We are entering a future filled with robotics, genetic engineering, and virtual realities that threaten to wash away our familiar world and our sense of who we are. Now, more than ever, we must bring the worship of the Orthodox Church to humanity. This worship is the living witness of the Bible, from Adam to the Second Coming. By offering the Body and Blood of Christ to the Father, we renew our own promise, and we renew the blessedness of all humanity. Can we allow the memory of Aaron, who burned incense and lighted candles before the Lord; can we allow this living experience to perish from humanity? Can we allow the priesthood of Melchizedek, and the offering of bread and wine to the Most High God; can we allow humanity to turn its back on this powerful worship? Maybe we should just cut the Book of Genesis from the Bible, or maybe the Book of Exodus, the Second Book of Moses? ... If

we don't practice them, why read them? My brothers and sisters, for the good of all, we cannot allow humanity to forget itself or to lose itself in the disorienting and chaotic sea of the future.

This worship holds the spiritual genetics of all humanity, purified by the teachings of Christ. All that is good and pure from human civilization is present here during the liturgy, brought together to survive the waves of chaos and disorder. Our ancestors, our grandfathers and grandmothers, are present. And when the next generations continue this worship, we will be present, present before our Messiah, the Lamb who sits on the throne.

Today, renew and purify your hearts and minds in the mystery of his Body and Blood, renew the baptism that purified your body and soul, and renew the chrismation that anointed you a priest-king for humanity. This is what happens every time we offer the Eucharist, and it is this that makes us one body in Christ. No matter how small our achievements, no matter how humble our position or title, no matter how incomplete our lives or our efforts, we are all in Christ. Together, we march faithfully into the future, and together we shall advance in our world the victory of Christ.

From the Fifth Chapter of the First Epistle General of St. John: This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. +

Anthem

A Novel by Ayn Rand

THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPHS are from the Author's Preface to the novel. Ayn Rand is by no means an Orthodox Christian or an Orthodox Jew. Her writings show little sympathy for any idea of God or gods. However, she was an ardent enemy of those political ideologies which aim to make slaves of the whole human species. This slavery was most evident in the 1930s and 1940s in the Concentration Camps of the Third Reich and the Gulags of the Soviet Union. The horrors of Maoist China and of Communist Eastern Europe were yet to appear. The Berlin Wall and the guard towers and barbed wire had not yet divided nations between slave and free peoples.

Any overbearing government that enforces regulations, taxes, fines, fees, and incarceration upon its population arguing a greater good by the suppression of individual talent, energy, and invention, was regarded by Ayn Rand as slavery. Given the seductions of Collectivism it is not likely that voters will be given any important choices from any candidates in the elections this Fall. The candidates will generally promise more social benefits in exchange for taking more money and more freedom from everyone, especially wage workers. However, these observations may help some of us to listen to the promises of Collectivist Utopia with a more critical ear and mind.

From the Author's Preface to the book:

F.1 This story was written in 1937.

F.2 I have edited it for this publication, but have confined the editing to its style; I have reworded some passages and cut out some excessive language. No idea or incident was added or omitted; the theme, content and structure are untouched. The story remains as it was. I have lifted its face, but not its spine or spirit; these did not need lifting.

F.3 Some of those who read the story when it was first written, told me that I was unfair to the ideals of collectivism; this was not, they said, what collectivism preaches or intends; collectivists do not mean or advocate such things; nobody advocates them.

F.4 I shall merely point out that the slogan "Production for use and not for profit" is now accepted by most men as commonplace, and a commonplace stating a proper, desirable goal. If any intelligible meaning can be discerned in that slogan at all, what is it, if not the idea that the motive of a man's work must be the needs of others, not his own need, desire or gain?

F.5 Compulsory labor conscription is now practiced or advocated in every country on earth. What is it based on, if not the idea that the state is best qualified to decide where a man can be useful to others, such usefulness being the only consideration, and that his own aims, desires, or happiness should be ignored as of no importance?

F.6 We have Councils of Vocations, Councils of Eugenics, every possible kind of Council, including a World Council -- and if these do not as yet hold total power over us, is it from lack of intention?

F.7 "Social gains," "social aims," "social objectives" have become the daily bromides of our language. The necessity of a social justification for all activities and all existence is now taken for granted. There is no proposal outrageous enough but what its author can get a respectful hearing and approbation if he claims that in some undefined way it is for "the common good."

F.8 Some might think -- though I don't -- that nine years ago [1937] there was some excuse for men not to see the direction in which the world was going. Today, the evidence is so blatant that no excuse can be claimed by anyone any longer. Those who refuse to see it now are neither blind nor innocent.

F.9 The greatest guilt today is that of people who accept collectivism by moral default; the people who seek protection from the necessity of taking a stand, by refusing to admit to themselves the nature of that which they are accepting; the people who support plans specifically designed to achieve serfdom, but hide behind the empty assertion that they are lovers of freedom, with no concrete meaning attached to the word; the people who believe that the content of ideas need not be examined, that principles need not be defined, and that facts can be eliminated by keeping one's eyes shut. They expect, when they find themselves in a world of bloody ruins and concentration camps, to escape moral responsibility by wailing: "But I didn't mean this!"

F.10 Those who want slavery should have the grace to name

it by its proper name. They must face the full meaning of that which they are advocating or condoning; the full, exact, specific meaning of collectivism, of its logical implications, of the principles upon which it is based, and of the ultimate consequences to which these principles will lead.

F.11 They must face it, then decide whether this is what they want or not.

--Ayn Rand.

April, 1946

The Rich Man and Lazarus

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

"No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

IN THIS GOSPEL reading today, we have a very dramatic story of two men, one rich, and one poor. These two men could be said to have lived on opposite ends of the spectrum of human existence. While one was fed with plenty of food, the other went hungry. While one drank his fill, the other was thirsty. While one received an abundance of good things, the other went without.

However, each of these men met a common end in death. Despite the circumstances of their lives, each one in the end faced his own mortality. It is there, in the next life, that each one experienced the end result of his actions and character during

his earthly life. The Gospel tells us that the poor man was carried into a place of rest by the angels themselves, while the rich man entered into a place of torment. Looking up, he saw Lazarus, the beggar, in a place of rest, and he called out asking for mercy. But he is told by the Prophet Abraham that he in his life received good things, while Lazarus received evil things, and that their situations are now reversed. While the poor man once lived in misery, he is now comforted; but while the rich man once lived in comfort, he is now in torment.

At first glance, this parable may appear to condemn the rich, and champion poverty for its own sake. However, I believe there is a deeper meaning. We must first realize that Abraham himself was a rich man when he lived; so certainly he cannot be condemning riches on their own account. But Abraham differed from the rich man in the parable inasmuch as, according to the Scripture, all peoples in the world were blessed through Abraham. The rich man, however, used his wealth only for himself. Not only did he use it exclusively for himself, if this were not enough, but he even ignored the man who lay at the very gate of his home, sick and in need. In this parable, as in other parables in the Gospel, Christ teaches that the way to God is through our neighbor. A Byzantine writer once said that one who is not a lover of humanity cannot be a lover of God.

Because we are created as humans in the Image of God, and because the Son of God took on humanity in the Person of Jesus Christ, we are obliged to see the face of Christ in our fellow humans. Instead of ignoring our neighbor who is in need, like the rich man in today's Gospel reading, we must treat him as we would Christ himself. We are called to treat our brothers as we would Christ. We are called to give of whatever we have been given, whether talents, time, or resources, to help our brothers and sisters. First, we must recognize that our lives and everything we have been given are gifts from God. Only then, with a grateful heart, can we offer them back to God by using them to serve our neighbor. By doing so, we will not only help others, but we will change ourselves – we will become a little more like Christ. Instead of ignoring our neighbor who is in need, like the rich man in today's Gospel reading, we must treat him as we would Christ himself.

-Sdn Jason Falcone



William Matsch Jr. with his newborn grandson, William Jonathan Franklin was born on April 13, 2012. Below: the Children's bell choir on I Easter ringing Jesus Christ is Risen today!



THE LION
1405 S. Vine Street
Denver, CO 80210

address correction requested

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V Rev John Charles Connely, editor

Reader Oliver John Brainerd, assistant and proof reader

Matushka Deborah Connely, staff photographer and bookstore manager

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