

Second Sunday after Christmas
January 2, 2011

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

TWO PERCEPTIONS, ONE REALITY

Psalm 8; Matthew 2:13-23

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

The English poet Thomas Tusser once said: “At Christmas play and make good cheer, for Christmas comes but once a year.” And for most of the world that once a year is now quite firmly in the past. It’s after New Year now; time to get rid of all vestiges of Christmas Day if you haven’t already. Out with the Christmas music, away with the decorations, and time to start that diet to lose all of the weight you put on from feasting and making merry. But the Church is not quite done celebrating yet. and so I say “a blessed Christmas to you all”; for in the Church the season goes on a little longer, and we are given the opportunity again to contemplate just what the coming of our Lord in the flesh means for us.

But the world is done with Christmas in more than just this seasonal way. To the world around us the coming of Christ is but a blip on the historical chart. Generally speaking all will acknowledge this as a rather important blip in that Christianity has been a major factor in this world’s history and to its culture; but for most people nowadays it is little more than that, a historical and cultural thing that has helped lay down a background for western life, but that has minimal personal importance in terms of how an individual’s life is actually lived out on a day to day basis, or in terms of impacting the future of that life or of providing any sort of chart or destination for it.



The world, for the most part, is not just done with Christmas, but is done with Christ. It has little use for the babe born in Bethlehem. It would rather continue unabated in its death-ward spiral, all the while hoping somehow for improvement. I was listening to NPR last week and they were speaking about how after World War II the nations of the world promised that they would never again tolerate genocide. And yet, since then we have seen such things happening in

Cambodia, in Iraq, in Rwanda, in Bosnia, in the Sudan; not to mention the ongoing infanticide that happens in the so-called family planning clinics of our own nation, a tragedy that makes Herod's rage seem like a minor and momentary tantrum. Is the world improving? Is it getting better without Christ? Technology has boomed in our own time with access to more information than the greatest libraries have held literally at our fingertips; and yet are we better off for it? Along with the good has come an awful lot of evil: websites dedicated to pursuing anorexia, to teaching people how to commit suicide, to pornography, to terrorism, and the like. Is the world improving without Christ? And these are but a few of the myriad ways the world seems to be getting worse and not better. Of course, historians will tell you that it has always been this way, this evil.

And let us not place the blame for such things only on the faceless conglomeration of forces at work on our globe, on heartless corporations, distant dictators and corrupt nations, but let us rather lay it where it belongs, at the feet of the individual. For it is by the small unrighteousnesses and evil deeds of daily life that the larger problems are spawned and nourished. Lives without Christ, without faith, cannot tend upward, but can only descend. Perhaps it is only at Christmas, as Dickens once wrote, that the world strives together for "a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable time; the only time... in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys." And why is this? Because the world is done with Christ. It listens not to His Word. It rejects the tidings of His coming. It has no faith in what He has done, or has promised yet to do. And in this each individual who turns away from the Lord, acts like a little Herod, attempting to slay Him, but only succeeding to exile Christ from the lands of his or her heart and mind.

But the unbelieving, individually or corporately, cannot slay Him, cannot reverse His advent, cannot undo what He has accomplished. And we must not allow this world's influence to steal Christ from us, or to weaken our faith in Him. The slaying of the innocents proclaimed something, you see, as did our Lord's exile into Egypt. These things which look so tragic, actually showed forth what sort of Child it was that was born in Bethlehem. This Jesus was no mere child, is no mere historical blip. For the voice of weeping in Ramah was a sign that the Lord was sending salvation to His people. In the verses immediately previous to the prophecy of the slaughtering of the Holy Innocents we hear: "For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, And ransomed him from the hand of one stronger than he... will turn their mourning to joy, I will comfort them, and make them rejoice rather than sorrow. I will satiate the soul of the priests with abundance, And My people shall be satisfied with My goodness, says the Lord" (Jer. 31:11-14). Indeed, "Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength", the strength of showing forth the person of Christ, "That You may silence the enemy and the avenger." And likewise the sending of Christ into Egypt was the fulfillment of prophecy about God calling His people back to

Himself and granting them salvation, a salvation found in His presence among them. These things proclaim that this Child is indeed the very Son of God come down to save us and draw us upward by the gentle cords of His grace to fellowship with God.

For we who believe the season of Christmas will eventually come to an end, but the joy of Christ's coming will never end. To paraphrase the repentant Scrooge, we keep Christmas in our hearts every day. But we do so not simply with outward festivity and generosity, but with faith and with love.

And so you see, there are two perceptions of Christ's coming at work here, and these are in opposition one to the other. There is the perception of Herod, a way of looking at the coming of Christ that leads him to action against Christ, to an attempt to end Him, an attempt that must settle with the slaughter of innocents who suffer and die for the sake of Christ's name. This is also the way of the world. The World's perception of Christ also leads it to action, to a minimizing of Christianity and of Christ, to a vehemence against all things Christian, and eventually to persecution of the faithful who also suffer in Christ's name. But Herod could not slay Christ, could not put an end to His Gospel or to His reign, and neither can the world. And so this false perception which is unbelief, along with its fruit of wickedness, leads only to destruction.

But there is also the true perception, the perception of faith. And this is the way of the Church's looking at things; a way which also leads to action, but to action of a different sort. It leads to belief first of all, to a reception of Christ's Word and of the Lord Christ Himself. And it leads to confession, the verbal confession of faith in Jesus, and the non-verbal confession of faithfulness in duty and of love and charity toward one's fellow human beings. And this the Church and each individual Christian does even in the faith of this world's opposition. And by the grace of Christ we persevere, for we know that the way of faith leads not to destruction, but to eternal life through and with Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And in spite of multiple perceptions of Christ, there is but one reality. Christ will always be who He is despite what people say about Him or do against Him or His Church. He will always be the Divine Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, who suffered and died for us, who rose again and ascended for us, and who lives and reigns. Herod could not undo that. The false prophets of the past could not undo that. The world today cannot undo that. This is reality.

And because Christ's work is certain, His promises are also certain and true. And what reality does that create for us? Today's Psalm, Psalm 8, tells us. "What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor." Christ has come to be one of us, granting to us a dignity that we in no way deserve. He has in His person elevated our humanity, who for us became a little lower than the angels. And now our race is crowned with

the glory and honor of the Son of God. And that means, according to this Psalm that all things have been put under Christ's feet, and under ours too, for we are one with Him, He our Head, we His Body. "You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen — even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas."

And so as we celebrate this holy season, let it not be confined to a day or two of rejoicing, but let us rejoice ever day in the Lord Jesus, who was born for us, who has gained us the victory and the dominion. This joy the world cannot reverse or silence. For Christ is the reality and our redeemer, the Lord, our Lord, whose name is excellent in all the earth! Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +