

## The Horizon of Christ

Preached on The First Sunday in Advent  
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ  
Nov. 28, 2021  
Text: Rom 13: 8-14

Our Epistle today contains two great themes. The first reiterates Christian behavior inside and outside the Body of Christ as “love fulfilling the law.” Love is not only willing the good of the other person or even acting for the good of the other, though that is certainly part of it. Love also includes our desires, our affections, and our will; so that words like devotion, passion, trust, and worship, may also be predicated of what the Apostle calls “love.” One might call such love “strong love.” Strong love, or charity, is what the Apostle means when he writes, “Therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” We human beings are made for charity; and though it is in accord with human nature, we cannot achieve true charity without the supernatural assistance of the Holy Spirit. *All* the supernatural virtues—faith, hope, and charity—are necessary if we are to achieve our true end.

The second half of our text is a call to conversion in light of the Second Advent of Christ. By virtue of our baptism into Christ we are emancipated from the dominion of sin and death since we have died and been buried with Christ. And yet, as Paul writes, we have also been raised with Christ in his Resurrection. We are now equipped to live the common life within the Body of Christ that is marked by patience, charity, kindness, prayer, putting others first, and forgiveness. What makes our life a common life is that we all share to some degree the horizon of Jesus as a gift bestowed to us in Baptism.

What do we mean by horizon? Literally a horizon is the limit of one’s vision from a specific point of reference. What is inside your horizon has meaning for you. On the other hand, what is outside your horizon doesn’t matter to you because it doesn’t exist for you. Your personal horizon is limited by your experience, knowledge, understanding, and concern. Since you are the reference point, your horizon includes not only what you believe, what you worship and how you live; it also determines what you reject as unbelievable, what you discard, and what you condemn. Thus one’s personal horizon includes definite judgments about what is true, good and beautiful, even if one is not always conscious of this.

Now if we are Christians, we are supposed to have a common share in Jesus’ horizon and spend our life individually and corporately appropriating it. This is where Christian conversion comes in. We frequently think of conversion as conversion from not being a Christian to being a Christian. But conversion should be ongoing. We are not saved once and for all at some exact moment in time (though many people believe precisely this). While we are engrafted into Christ at Baptism, few would argue that we

can just “coast” thereafter. We have been rescued from the dominion of sin; but we are still weak, fallen, and in need of spiritual care, nourishment, and rehabilitation. We need continual saving, just as we need continual feeding and exercise. The Christian life is a pilgrimage—not a rest stop you never leave.

Before conversion, one’s personal horizon has a feeling permanency and inevitability. But as we appropriate the means of grace in the Church, our personal horizons should be stretched and challenged by our growing, maturing awareness of Jesus’s horizon. Holding tightly to our former horizon or perspective, on the other hand, is more often than not an indication of spiritual sloth or complacency. It is really the slumber Paul writes about. If you think any change in yourself or your outlook is bad, does this include the growth that should be occurring within you by means of the Holy Spirit? Intransigence will sometimes be called for; but as a principle governing your whole life it leads to ossification and a quenching of the Spirit. In this case, God is not being honored; rather, *you* are still on the throne.

The unfortunate truth is that much of the American church-going public is not ultimately guided by a narrative informed by Jesus’s approach to life but one in which autonomy and self-determination take center stage. Today, our vision of America quite often sets the ground rules for how our Christianity will be understood. This is not surprising considering how intimately our forebears and millions today have tied God’s purposes to our particular nation. But the problem with such a strong identification of a nation with God is that the people can no longer hear God’s voice, especially when it challenges a nation’s self-understandings, ambitions, and idols. God becomes a mere rubber stamp. Christians need to reverse this. The Church is not here to serve the City of Man; it is here to judge and guide the City of Man. The Church is the repository and disseminator of God’s ultimate will for man and the cosmos. Only to the degree that the City of Man approximates God’s City is it legitimate. The Church is therefore authorized to judge this fallen city negatively when it fails to conform to God’s City. The City of Man is not an end in itself.

The world needs to see a Church with real integrity, producing people whose primary identity is modeled on the Risen Christ, not on one of our many ideological idols. If we continue to treat churches as spiritual boutiques and its members primarily as consumers, then it is unlikely that real disciples will be produced. But *these* are the very people God can really use to carry out his will.

It is obvious that we cannot become such people if we don’t “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” as St. Paul says. This is to adopt Jesus’s horizon, his way of viewing things. We are Christ’s Body. If Christians took this corporate reality seriously, we would be a Church with which the world would have to reckon. A Church selling an individualized and therapeutic gospel will not be able to stand firm against forces seeking to use Her. But a people truly following Jesus might reveal to a cynical public a Church *not* lost in self-absorption and consumerism, *not* living in delusion, *not* tempted by the power-

hungry within Her to control things through manipulation and violence. Unbelievers would then see a confident people who exude peace and generosity, who know the battle has already been won, and whose very existence provides glimpses of the Divine Life.

In all of our circumstances St. Paul is encouraging us to “incarnate the Incarnation,” to become Imitators of Christ—in other words, his disciples. The love of God that has been shed abroad in our hearts should work through us as we imitate Jesus. Those who have by the grace of God entered into the horizon of Jesus the Messiah are able, like him, to suspend self-regard and truly care for other people, even the enemy. On the other hand, it is the clinging to our inadequate horizons which *prevents* us from being Christ to others.

Because having a share in Jesus’ horizon is a pure gift from God, it is not a human achievement. God must work in our hearts by his Spirit to turn our deepest desire to its proper object. When that happens, we truly desire to be drawn into his life, to grow, mature, and see the world of men and things the way Jesus sees them. We want to value what he values, make his ultimate concern our ultimate concern. Our true heart is eventually revealed in our speech, desires, attitudes, and behaviors. If that heart belongs to Jesus, then we are converting continually and deeply every day, and that will be evident outwardly over time. Through Baptism and the loving care and teaching of the Church, we have entered into Jesus’ life story. Our autobiography has been assumed into Jesus’s autobiography. And today’s Epistle declares that Jesus’s story is coming to its end, its consummation. “The day is at hand,” writes St. Paul.

So let us fight the distractions of the self-seeking world, the world which more and more people in the West believe is the only world. Let us stop seeing the world as God-less, where through our arrogance we believe our puny understandings of reality are beyond critique. We are not ultimately in control nor are we as rational as we like to believe. Though some people are capable of sustained critical thinking, generally humanity—even intellectuals—are, and always have been, guided by self-serving narratives more than impartial intellect. The disinterested person standing outside time and culture, weighing the naked “facts,” is a modern myth. We are creatures who live by faith, even if our faith happens to be in science. Humans have made some great advances, technologically and socially. But the heart of man without Christ is still selfish and full of folly. Of ourselves, we cannot straighten, in Kant’s words, the “crooked timber of humanity.”

Yet, while Christians can be realistic about human sin, they need not descend into despair. For God has already defeated the powers that subjugate us. Only in Him can we truly be healed, and secure the deep love, significance, and security we crave. In this season of preparation, we are staking everything on the return of the King, when the true narrative will finally be manifested to the whole world. Death will vanish like an old gloomy dream, and all of creation will be perfected by the grace of the risen Christ. The

kingdoms of this world, delivered from sin and death, will be returned to the Father by the Son (1Cor. 15: 22-24).

This is the certain future of this world, and realizing this should shake us from our spiritual slumber. Furthermore, this end is inescapable. The whole universe is moving to its finality, its goal, its purpose in Jesus Christ, with the Church in the vanguard. This is the season to ask if we truly wish to join Her, or just sit on the sidelines.

*In the Name...*