

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Apr 13th 2015

When I die, the presider at my funeral will say, over my coffin, “At his baptism, Robert died with Christ and rose with him to new life.” That’s what this passage from the gospel of John is all about. Nicodemus is obviously puzzled, and it’s a mystery equally hard for us to get our heads around. We tend to take Jesus’ statement as a figure of speech – flowery language. But what if it were literally true?

There are dozens of instances throughout both the gospels and St. Paul’s letters that, taken at face value, seem to assume that it is exactly true. In today’s gospel Jesus, of course, is not speaking of physical birth, as Nicodemus first thought. He was speaking of life itself; he was speaking of the spirit that animates us, the spirit that in subsequent centuries we came to call our “soul”. He was saying that, unless Jesus’ Spirit animates us – in a sense replaces our soul – we will not share His life. But it’s not a matter of our willing it. It’s what happens in baptism. We can’t do it ourselves; God does it for us.

Listen to St. Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). You say “Well, that’s all very well for Paul, but I’m not worthy to be animated literally by the Spirit of Jesus.” No, of course not. It’s pure gift. Our “worthiness” comes from the gift and is not a pre-condition for it. That’s how and why Paul refers to his fractious Corinthian converts as “saints” – not because of their behaviors (which were often reprehensible), but because of their baptisms – who they now are. My grandmother used to say to me “Act your age, Bobbin”. Act like who you are. So throughout his letters St. Paul insists: “Be who you are.” Not “Become holy”. But “You already are holy – not because of your actions, but because of the Spirit of Jesus that animates you now.” And: “For as many of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ . . . in Christ Jesus you are all children of God.” (Gal. 3:26-27)

We can ignore that Jesus-life; we can fail to respond to its urgings; in short, we can be lukewarm – or even bad – Christians. But, once baptized, once my human life is replaced by Jesus’ own life, I can never again be non-Christian. Baptism is not simply entrance into an organization, which I can drop out of whenever it no longer seems to suit my needs. It is a life change that is irreversible. It’s not an ideal we have to strive toward. It’s a reality we have to live. Can I really accept that it is Christ’s life that animates – inspirits me? Can I even grasp that?

Robert Heaney - Creighton University's John A. Creighton University Chair