

## **SERMON- All Saints' Day (C)**

**Charles R. Cowherd**

Daniel 7:1-3,15-18

Psalm 149

**Good Shepherd (Burke)**

**November 3, 2019**

Ephesians 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-31

### **OPENER:**

It was once said, in terms of Sunday mornings, something had shifted, something had changed forever, once Car Dealerships in the American South started to open on Sunday mornings.

Then you knew that we had entered something like a Post-Christian Era.

That is, we had passed the point where the assumption, the expected, and the cultural norm was Christianity.

Until that moment, the Church had held a preeminent place in Western society, it had been on top since Constantine and the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but that had been changing, as church attendance lessened, soccer games started to sprout up, and then all the sudden even the Car Dealerships in the Bible Belt had their "OPEN" signs out.

The Church has reacted slowly to that change, trying to live into the future while holding on to the past. It's an interesting transition—this shift between Sunday morning representing this time for Church versus just another day of the week. This change will probably continue throughout our life times at different paces in different places across the country and the world.

This sermon is not a lament though, or an attack on our culture. I think we will be fine, God has us. Besides, I was told countless of times going through seminary that this is actually a great opportunity with the mission field wide open. I was told, breathlessly, "you and your peers get to be just like the early disciples!"

### **ADULT BAPTISM:**

Today we get a glimpse of what it was all like back before. We get a glimpse of church not as something to be expected, or as something passed down, but as a choice, a decision, one that did not seem inevitable but guided by the Holy Spirit.

Today our baptismal candidates provide that for us, they are adults who are choosing, against the trends, to be a part of this world. They give us a glimpse back into what the early church was like and then also maybe forward into what the future will look like.

## **EARLY BAPTISM:**

First, let us go back: In the early church, Adult Baptism, not Infant Baptism, was the norm. This was because chances were that your parents were not Christian because there were few Christians, in fact it was a despised, persecuted sect. The decision to become one, to be baptized, was therefore not one to be taken lightly. With it came, potentially, the threat of physical danger and separation from one's biological family.

The instruction for Baptism was lengthy and difficult, a three year period of intense study that set you apart from the pagan world around you.

All throughout those three years, those to be baptized would always be excluded from the later portions of the service: the Passing of the Peace, the Prayers of the People, and, most importantly, the Eucharist. There was no internet to look it up, nor even were people literate, so it was an utter mystery what was to take place next! When it did happen, the baptized were astonished, this feeling of their eyes being opened to a new reality. In fact: "The experience... was so traumatic that... it felt that they had died and been raised, that they had been reborn."<sup>1</sup>

## **SHIFT:**

This was the early experience of the Church, the Church of so many of the saints that we celebrate today. During that time, somehow, the Church persisted and survived and thrived.

Then, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and the dominant religious practice. Gradually, Adult Baptism became less and less frequent as parents wanted to baptize their children at a young age. With Christianity settled in as the *de facto* norm in the Western World, initiation became less of a choice, instead baptism was very often a social and cultural expectation. That pattern more or less persisted, with lots and lots of arguments in between, for a millennium and a half until about..... now.

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<sup>1</sup> Marion Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, 252-255

## **INFANT BAPTISM:**

Now I am not denigrating infant baptism in any way. I was baptized as an infant, my own son was baptized before he was one year old, and I suspect a majority of us here today were baptized then. It's just a different context, a different understanding, a different manner of entering into this "glorious inheritance among the saints" that our Ephesians reading talks about.<sup>2</sup>

It all begs the question though: what is going on with this sacrament of baptism, what happens there?

### **XIAOs:**

Again a look at our baptismal candidates give us a glimpse:

The Xiaos came to this country not knowing anyone and not knowing the church. They first interacted with Good Shepherd by taking English classes in the basement of this church. They then enrolled their youngest son in the preschool here, while their eldest son got active in the youth group and in the acolytes.

The family volunteered and participated in the various ministries here, eventually making the decision that the two young men would be baptized.

All this time, they have been faithful members of this church, volunteering and helping out with various ministries for a few years now.

In the language of our service, in the Canons of the church, the Baptism marks them as having joined the church. But clearly, in another sense, they have already done so.

### **PROCESS:**

I would suggest that this process of becoming the Church, for them, and for us, for adults and for infants, is ongoing.

Because, when do we fully cognitively understand this mystery of Baptism? (Not to mention spiritually, mystically, theologically.)

When does one "become" something?

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<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 1.18

Think about your vocation, your occupation. When is a “doctor”, really a “doctor”? When they get their MD? Or when they finish Med School? When they treat their first patient? When they lose their first patient? When exactly do they become a “doctor”?

The same could be said for a lawyer..... or for a priest. When does a priest become a priest? When the stole is laid upon him or her, or when they first hear that call for the first time? When you finish seminary? When you preach your first sermon? Or when you lose that first congregant or fall flat on your face?

The beauty of Baptism is that represents entry into Christian life, entry into the Christian community. It happens in the ritual once and for all. But it is the first step of many. “Salvation is a journey, not an event” in Frederick Buechner’s phrase with a lifetime of continual renewing, and turning, and turning, and turning, always seeking repentance and nourishment.<sup>3</sup>

## **CONCLUSION:**

That ongoing process helps to remind us that God always has the initiative in Baptism at whatever age of life, in every age of history.

In other words, our baptismal candidates, thanks be to God, and all of us, have found a place at the Church of the Good Shepherd, but not because of us the sheep, but because of the Good Shepherd.

That “glorious inheritance” comes from Christ, and not from the Church itself. On this All Saints Day in this baptismal celebration, we are reminded that we are continually journeying, as a church and as individuals, to enter into that process, to “set ourselves apart” as holy saints, and to fully live into the riches of that inheritance.

**AMEN**

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<sup>3</sup> John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 459-460.