

Proper 12C – “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the lord, so live in him.” Col. 2.6

There was a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village in a faraway land who walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "Were any great men born in this village?"

The old man replied, "Nope, only babies."

Now we may smile at this sharp retort by the villager in response to the offending tourist, but there is great truth in his words. Great men and women are not born into the world. Babies are born into the world. They come defenseless and starry eyed like visitors from another planet. They cry and gawp and blink in the bright lights. They grasp to their mothers breast and hope upon the care of strangers. This is not to say that babies are not joys to behold. To the contrary, they capture our imaginations, and we almost involuntarily speak to them in happy tones and silly made-up words. Babies are born into the world, and we are glad.

But we are not glad if a baby, in all its round glory, remains a baby. Instead, we begin to whisper that something may be wrong. The

mother has creeping anxieties that the child is not meeting the averages on the developmental charts and doctors are called and tests are run. Babies are beautiful and we say that we wish that they would never grow up, but we do not mean it. A baby is a joy for the moment, but we see in it, we hope for it, that it will grow to become a great man. It must mature. It must overcome. It must take up the challenge of life and run the race that is set before it.

So it is that St. Paul writes to his children in Colossians, for they were his progeny though he had never met them. His faithful friend and minister Epaphras had brought Paul's message of Jesus the resurrected Messiah to them, he had given birth to them. He had fed them upon the sweet milk of the Gospel. Paul writes to them to tell them that he had heard of their birth to new life in Christ from Epaphras. They had been born into the kingdom of God and become fellow citizens with the saints in light. He praised God for their safe delivery and offered prayers to the Father for their development. They were beautiful babies, but they must not remain so. No, they must press forward, they must grow up, they must become full fledged, mighty men of the kingdom. They must grow into the likeness of the great man of the kingdom, Jesus himself. He is true God, and true

man. He is the one that rules over all things in heaven and earth. He is the firstborn from the grave leaving the door wide for many new births to follow. So Paul writes to them, “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” They are complete in Christ, now they must live in him.

But to press our youthful theme yet further we wonder what is necessary for a child to blossom to full adulthood. Good health, strong bodies and minds come from an abundance of good food and good instruction. We do not leave a child to fend for themselves along the grocery store aisles, but we present them with meals carefully balanced with vitamins, proteins and carbohydrates. Neither do we park them in front of the television for 20 years and expect their minds, wills and imaginations to be equipped to grapple with the demands of modern life. Instead, we, often against their wills, submit our bright young charges to years of instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic.

Paul would have his Colossian children feast and learn upon the life-giving Scriptures and heavenly wisdom and understanding. But we find that they had been offered an alternative diet, a competing curriculum. So Paul warns them that they not allow anyone, “to take advantage of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the rulers of the universe, and not according to Christ.” The Colossians, in their youth and childlike devotion, were being tempted to eat things and learn things that were not healthy for them. It is likely that they, like the young Christians in Galatia, were tempted to think of Judaism as being the fulfillment of the Christian life instead of realizing that life in Christ was the crowning achievement and final chapter of the hope of the Jews. Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. By his incarnation, death and resurrection he had fulfilled God’s promises to the Jews and had opened the gates of the kingdom wide for the Gentiles. But now, immature as they were, the Colossians had begun to think that they were not complete in Jesus. That to become full fledged Christians that they must incorporate the piety of the Jews. That to be mature they must follow the traditions of the Jewish dietary laws and keep the calendar of Jewish feasts and festivals. That to be full of heavenly

wisdom and understanding they had to commit to the days of fasting and devote themselves to the Old Testament law that had been delivered by the very hands of angels. All of these practices seemed to the Colossians to be very grown up and sober and devout. Paul writes to warn them that if they follow this path they will never reach maturity, for they will have cut themselves off from the only source of life. Those who would practice these traditions have left off from the Head, from whom the whole body is nourished and knit together.

They have left off from Christ! It is Christ, you see, who is the only source of life. It is he that stands at the top of the body, which is the Church. Like the head of the human body he contains the sight, the smell, the taste. It is there that we find the mind full of wisdom and understanding. Through the head of the body comes the life-giving draft of breath. The head also directs the heart and organs to proceed upon their courses. What is the body without the head? It is perishing. It is death itself. Even so, the Jew and the Gentile alike cannot rest upon the former traditions of men, even those holy and heaven sent to Moses. Now that the Messiah has come there is no returning to former things. It is Jesus the Christ who is complete in all his glory. And he is the source of completeness, of maturity, for the

Christian. For Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption”. What can human tradition add to this fullness that we have in Jesus? There is nothing.

So, Paul writes to the Colossians, “since you have been given Christ Jesus the Lord, you must live in him”. We like the Colossians have been given the heavenly treasure of faith in Jesus the Messiah. In him we have found forgiveness of our sins and a promise of eternal life. By him we have received adoption as sons of the Father. Through him we have received the gift of sanctification as we have now become residences of God’s own Spirit. In Jesus’ death we have died so that we may be raised with him. See what great goodness and health we have in him. So we have received Christ.

But we must also live in him. The Greek verb here does not say that we should live in Christ. To live in Christ perhaps is more agreeable to our ears. But Paul exhorts us to walk in Christ. We are to make tracks, we are to march out, we must stop crawling and begin walking. We must enact the example of our Savior in our daily motions. How shall we do this? We must walk firmly rooted in Christ. So says Paul, the

lover of mixed metaphors. We must walk like trees rooted in dark and fertile soil fed by the fresh streams. We must not be confused like the Colossians and so many Christians since their time who have been afraid to be rooted in him. Instead, they were concerned that their sins and offences, their childishness would keep them from him. And so they sought out mediators to take their cause before the throne of heaven. They asked the assistance of angels and saints and even the Virgin Mary. But we must have none of those things. The saints, angels and Jesus' own mother were holy and acceptable before the Father because they were rooted in Christ. It is there that they found their consolation and their greatest joy. To find our joy in them is to refuse their testimony to us. No, we must like them find our only habitation rooted firmly in Jesus the Son of God who has been given to us.

And not only must we be rooted in Christ, but we must be built up in Christ, abounding in thanksgiving. Our roots having gone deep, drawing up life, we must be constructed as a living temple to the glory of God. As mature in Christ our lives must be testaments to the gift we have been given, Jesus himself. Children in their behavior show their youth and their need for growth. But we must grow into the

image of Christ. We must bear fruit. We must bespeak the faith that is within us not only in good works, but in lives lived in thanksgiving. For Satan, death and the grave have been overcome and we have been given the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.