

The Feast for the Annunciation of our Lord Hebrews 10:4-10

There is something strange about the Feast for the Annunciation of our Lord, is there not? You come to Church for Lenten worship, and expect the service to be about what Lent is about, penitence and the Passion of the Christ, and sad hymns of sin and suffering. And then the colour is white, and you are made, to sing hymns that are, if not exactly Christmas Carols then at least *somewhat* Christmas-y.

Well, I suppose those of you who notice will be more surprised at this than I; after all, I prepared the service for tonight, which means that I have known about it for quite a while.

Or could it be, as I suspect is often the case, that the Pastor is really the only one to notice the distinct tone and savour the unique flavour of each individual worship service, and care about the colours, because he is the one who gets to prepare it and think about it and live and breathe it for weeks in advance? It might be, and if it is, it is not necessarily a disaster. The Word will work what God will have it work, in all of its forms. And the particular flavour of each individual worship service, and the different seasonings of the seasons, all this is but different forms of preaching and teaching. And so, even though some Christians neither notice the colours in Church nor savour the different seasonings of the seasons, it does not necessarily mean that none of it works on them, or works *in* them, even though they themselves do not notice that it does, and how; that is, after all, how the Word of God most often works in the hearts and minds of those who hear it.

Be that as it may, the Feast for the Annunciation falls as a feast in the midst of the Fast, a celebration in the midst of sorrow and suffering, like a little Christmas in Lent. For those who notice, there is, if not quite a contradiction, then nevertheless a clear contrast between the tone of penitence and the Passion of the Christ which is the flavour of Lent, and that of celebration which is the flavour of the Feast for the Annunciation of our Lord.

Except that in what we hear tonight, those different tones are combined and conjoined, as we hear of the Letter to the Hebrews why it is that the Son of God came down from Heaven and was conceived by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made Man; that this happened because *it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*.

This is the reason the Son of God came; for this reason He had Himself made flesh and blood so as to give His body over to sufferings and death and shed His blood for the remission of sins. And for this reason His Church celebrates the Annunciation of the Lord, and that, when His coming was announced, nine months prior to His birth, He was made Man in the womb of His blessed mother, that is: He became a human being and a member of Mankind, although, obviously not so as to be a full-grown man from the very beginning.

From what we hear tonight we learn that the Son of God came to suffer as the only sacrifice for sins sufficient to actually save sinners.

We also learn that what He came to do was to do the Father's will. *When Christ came into the world, as we hear it, He said: "Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body have You prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings You have taken no pleasure. Then I said: 'Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the Book.'" In other words, it is the Son of God who speaks in the Psalm. And God prepared a body for Him in order for Him to suffer as a sacrifice for the salvation of sinners. This is what is and always was the Father's will, and what He promised in the Book.*

The Law was never about itself, with its calls for holiness and holy living, of abstaining from certain foods, and ritual washings. It was never meant as the way for sinners to actually be *holy* in the sight of God, pure and perfect, and righteous and right with Him. God always knew that the sinners He had called to be His people would *sin*. That is why He had established ordinances of sacrifice to begin with, for the atonement of the sins of His people.

But the sacrifices were never about themselves, either; they were not the real thing. *For, as we hear it tonight, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.* They could never be sufficient to make up for the evil that sin is, disobedience against God, born of the defiance of the human heart, ungodly and evil and impure as it is. For anyone who has any sense of who God is, of His holiness and the wholeness of His goodness and His hatred of evil, this would be obvious. As the Letter to the Hebrews also writes it: *according to this arrangement, that of the Law, that is, gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot satisfy the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation, that is: until the salvation of God would be revealed in its fullness in Christ.*

Or as we hear it tonight about the offerings and sacrifices of the Law: *these are offered according to the Law.*

The ordinances of holiness under the Law were but temporary measures to prepare the people of God to recognise the glory of His salvation, and receive it with joy, once it was revealed in its fullness; and, in the meantime, to remind them that there was more to come, that the goodness of God is greater than what they yet knew, and thus to keep them in the faith until the promises would be fulfilled.

The same holds true, also, for the call to holy living found in the Law; just as *it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*, so it is also impossible for sinners to make ourselves *holy* by our own goodness and godliness, that is: pure and perfect in the sight of God, right with Him and righteous before His judgement. For not only would our own attempts at goodness and godliness always be incomplete and insufficient; born of the flesh, that is: of sinful human nature, they would also be *sinful* in themselves, attempts at self-righteousness and self-realisation, at making ourselves to be like God, and be gods to ourselves, masters of good and evil, born of the refusal of sinful nature allow God alone to be good, and the Giver of all things good, and of all true goodness.

The Law was never about itself. As we are reminded tonight that the Son of God says it in the Psalm: *Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have You prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings You have taken no pleasure. Then I said: 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'*

The Law always pointed forward to the fulfilment, the holiness that has come in Christ, the perfect purity given to sinners in Him, His own holiness as the Holy One of God, and the holiness accomplished and earned for sinners in the pure and perfect life He lived as a Man, on behalf of all Mankind, in full and complete love for God, and obedience to Him, and submission to His will, completed and consummated in His bitter sufferings and death under the judgement and damnation of God against all sin, all evil and ungodliness and impurity of sinners, as the full and final and real sacrifice for the sin of all sinners, sufficient to actually take all sin away from us sinners. *Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the Book.* And as we also hear it tonight, *by this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* By this we really are righteous and right with God.

On account of the price He has paid for us He claims us as His own before the Father. On account of the holiness He has earned on our behalf He pleads us pure and perfect. And this is pleasing to the Father. And the love the Son has shown Him with His sufferings to bring His will to completion is pleasing to Him, also, and the most precious of all. So He will not reject the plea of His Son, the Beloved, who has brought His will to completion in all things, in His life and in His death. And why would He, when His will always was our salvation? *Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body have You prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings You have taken no pleasure; no, but in the sacrifice of the Son for the salvation of us sinners the Father does delight and take pleasure.*

And so we are reminded, again, tonight, on the Feast for the Annunciation of our Lord, that our salvation always was and always is the Father's will; and that our salvation has in fact been accomplished once for all; and we have all reason to celebrate this, we sinners who are His Church and His Christians, and ever so much more as God Himself celebrates it, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, because the salvation of sinners is what is and always was His will, and what is most precious to Him.

There is something strange about the Feast for the Annunciation of our Lord; if not quite a contradiction, there certainly remains a certain tension between the tone of penitence and the Passion of the Christ which is the flavour of Lent, and that of celebration is the flavour of the Feast for the Annunciation of our Lord.

Tonight, though, as we meditate upon the Epistle reading appointed for the Feast, these tones, as different as they may seem, are combined and conjoined. And how could we ever forget either? The Son of God was made flesh, for our salvation, and at this we rejoice, just as we do at Christmas. But He was made flesh so as to give His body over to suffer and shed His blood as the only sufficient sacrifice for the salvation of sinners. So how can we not repent and lament our sin, knowing of the suffering we brought upon with our sin? And how can we not rejoice, with God Himself, that our salvation has been brought to completion by His sacrifice, that by virtue of His sufferings we really are righteous and right with God, rescued from eternal death and damnation to eternal life with Him in the fullness of His goodness and His glory?

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. *Amen.*