

Merry Christmas!

In the name of him in whom we were chosen before the foundation of the world, dear friends in Christ: Many years ago (I was still in high school) I played for a while in a church softball league. I confess that I was not a good ballplayer; but our church was rather small and they needed me in order to field a team – so I played as well as I could and in Christian charity they put up with my manifest faults. Anyway, somehow our team made it to the playoffs (no thanks to me). It happened that while playing an important game against a team that should've beaten us hands down, our team was managing to hold its own. In the end, it came down to this: it was the bottom of the last inning and we were down by two runs. Our team was at bat. We had two outs, runners on first and second, and I was up. It's safe to say at that point everyone on both teams assumed the game was as good as over. It was no secret that I was not among our team's better hitters. So, what happened? I managed to knock a line drive right over second base. If there hadn't been anyone on, it might have been good for a single; but with a runner being forced to second, it was an easy out. I mean, I hit it right to the centerfielder, who was one of their best players. And he had come in quite close because he knew that I rarely managed to hit the ball out of the infield. But as luck would have it, the ball bounced in front of him, he scooped low to get it and missed it clean; went right between his legs. By the time he got his hands on it, I was flying past third. He knew he couldn't stop me, so he didn't even bother to throw. Instead he stood there shaking his head in disgust at himself. And then he hollered at me, "Well, merry Christmas!" Though it was the month of August, his meaning was clear. He was saying that it was a pure gift – one that I most certainly did not deserve. And it was true. He knew it. I knew it. All the other players and spectators knew it. But you know what? Though it was a gift – one that I in no way deserved – we still won the game. "Merry Christmas" indeed.

Now, of course, when that player said, "Merry Christmas", I'm pretty sure that he didn't mean it in a benevolent sense. There was the distinct ring of sarcasm in his voice. He did not intend to give me the gift he did. But that is not the case in today's Old Testament reading in which the Lord offers to give young King Solomon any gift that his heart desires. "Ask what I shall give you", the Lord says to him. It's like a blank check from the Almighty. You name it: it's yours. Can you imagine that? To be able to ask for anything, anything at all in heaven and earth, and have the Lord God gladly give it to you? What an offer that would be! Given the chance, what would *you* ask for?

Solomon, we know, had the good sense to ask for a wise and discerning heart in order that he might rule well over God's people – which tells us that the Lord had already answered Solomon's request even before he made it. Who but a wise man would be clever enough to ask for wisdom? But here's the amazing part: having given Solomon the wisdom to ask for what he did, the Lord is so pleased with Solomon's request that he resolves to give him also all the other things he didn't ask for: wealth, fame, victory, honor, glory—far exceeding all the other Kings of Israel before and after him. Solomon couldn't lose. The Lord did it all for him: he made him King, he gave him the blank check, he gave him the wisdom to use it well, and on top of it he gave him all the rest of the things he didn't ask for. It seems that when the Lord desires to give a gift, he goes all the way. "Here you go. Merry Christmas!"

And you may be thinking, "That's fine and dandy for Solomon; I wish the Lord would make *me* the same offer. I could really use a gift like that." It's almost enough to make you a

little envious, isn't it? I mean, why not? Why is it that Solomon gets this wonderful gift, but not you? Why *doesn't* the Lord make you the same offer or one like it? It's not like it's going to cost him anything. All he has to do is will it, and it's yours. Wouldn't your life be a lot easier and more fulfilling? It reminds me of the character Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* who sings, "Lord who made the lion and the lamb, you decreed I should be what I am. Would it spoil some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man?" Not that it's riches in particular that you might be after (though you have to admit it wouldn't hurt); but what about all the rest of those gifts the Lord could give? Why not the wisdom, the honor, the fame, and sure, the wealth too? If it isn't going to adversely affect his master plan for the universe, why doesn't the Lord give you and me one very "Merry Christmas!" like that?

My friends, I'm here to tell you that he already did! In fact, he gave you far more than that. This is the point that St. Paul is hammering home for us in today's Epistle reading. You think Solomon was blessed? You think that he got some kind of special gift from the Lord? It's peanuts compared to what the Lord has given you. You have been graciously blessed far beyond anything King Solomon could have imagined. Sure, he got wisdom and earthly riches and fame; but Paul asks you to consider what *you* have received from the Lord. It's a rather lengthy list.

Paul writes, "He [the Lord] blessed us in Christ with *every* spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." Understand what he's saying: Solomon only received earthly blessings that have all passed away in time. Nothing remains of his kingdom or its glory. But you have received in Christ every *spiritual* blessing – the kind that never spoil or fade. Neither do they corrode, dent, scratch, wear out, rust, chip, or peel – ever. And because by faith you are in Christ who has now ascended to heavenly glory all that is his belongs to you. And through him, even as you continue here below, you are laying up for yourself eternal treasures. More on that in a bit. First Paul wants to take you back. Before looking forward into eternity and what you'll enjoy there, he wants you to consider what the Lord gave you before time began.

The Apostle writes, "He chose you in Jesus before the foundation of the world that you should be holy and blameless before him." Think about that for a moment. Paul is saying that before you were created – indeed, before *anything* was created – the Lord had already chosen you to be one of his own. That's what the word "holy" means. It means set apart; specifically set apart by the Lord for his use and purposes. The example I often use is the communion ware here on the altar. It's holy, set apart. You don't use it for eating lunch or supper. It's been consecrated to the Lord's service. In fact, the various pieces of communion ware are the vessels that contain Christ himself and through which God gives his gifts of grace to others. In a similar way, before the Lord even began to create the world, he knew you in a personal way, and he had a relationship with you even though you didn't exist yet, and he chose you to be a person set apart for him – a chosen vessel into which he would pour his love and grace and his Spirit and through which he would bless others. Paul also uses the word *blameless* to describe what the Lord chose you to be. It means without fault or blemish. Again, the communion ware analogy works. You think about how the altar guild polishes the silver so that the sacred vessels shine. In the same way, the Lord's plan from eternity past was to make you perfectly reflect the splendor of his glory.

That's a pretty amazing gift; but it's just the beginning of what the Lord gave you. Paul continues, "He predestined you for *adoption* through Jesus Christ." This steps up the idea several notches. The word rendered here "adoption" might better be translated "sonship". It's not just that the Lord chose you to be an object that belongs to him, or to be his servant or even a citizen in his kingdom; no, his plan all along was to make you a member of his family – his

own beloved child – so that his relationship with you in Christ Jesus is not merely a Creator/creature or Master/servant sort of thing; but the relationship of a father to his own dear son. It's on account of this that we don't have to imagine ourselves groveling before him like unworthy supplicants calling him Lord and Master; but rather we should see ourselves sitting in his lap where, embraced in his arms we call him, "Father" – or as we heard in last week's Epistle, in which Paul said we approach the Lord with the Hebrew word "Abba", which is best translated "Daddy". It's closer and far less formal than "Father". That's what the Lord predestined you to have in Christ: a relationship *that* close and special with him.

And having preordained you for this, the Lord established the plan of history and began unfolding the chain of events that would bring it about in time. I'm talking about the Creation of heaven and earth, the gift of life to our first parents and their being made in God's image, God's promise to send them a Savior after they fell into sin, and all the Old Testament interactions between the Lord and his people by which he ultimately brought his only-begotten Son into this world and gave him birth as a man of flesh and blood. He all did this, Paul explains, so that he could redeem you through the blood of Christ; that is, buy you back from the eternal death and hell you deserved because of your sins by having the sinless Son of God shed his blood and die in your place.

By Christ's redemptive death, Paul continues, "the Lord forgave your trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he *lavished* on you." The idea is one of complete excess. God's grace and forgiveness to you in Christ Jesus overflow. It's like knocking on your neighbor's door to ask for a cup of sugar that you need to complete a recipe, and they send you home with a whole truckload. That's how much forgiveness God pours out to you in Christ. That's how much forgiveness Jesus purchased for you by his death on the cross: so much that it not only covers your sin; but actually drowns it under an ocean of grace.

And he delivers this forgiveness to you, Paul says, "in all wisdom and insight, making known to you the mystery of his will." What Paul is speaking about here is divine wisdom; not the kind by which this world operates. I mean the world has its way of thinking – the truths we hold to be self evident; things like: "The righteous are rewarded; and the evil are punished", and "Seeing is believing", and "If it sounds too good to be true, that's because it is". This is the wisdom of the world. But with the wisdom of God you have been given, you understand things differently. For you it's "Christ was righteous and yet he was punished; and I am evil, yet for Christ's sake, I'm rewarded." And, "Seeing is not believing, it's the other way around: it's only by believing that you are able to see – see, for instance how a couple handfuls of water can be a powerful washing away of sin and a rebirth in the Holy Spirit, or how a wafer of bread and a sip of wine can be the body and blood of Christ." And finally "Even though the Gospel of God's grace in Christ sounds too good to be true, it is true. In fact, there is no truth more firmly established." You know, people sometimes make fun of us Christians for believing the things that we do. They think we're foolish. But the world with its wisdom is destined to pass away. The wisdom the Lord has given you endures forever and grants eternal life. Which wisdom would you rather have?

There's more. Paul continues, "In him [that is, Christ] he gave you an inheritance". It goes with being part of the family. Having been made a child of God through your Baptism into Christ, what belongs to the Father belongs to you: everything, every gift and spiritual blessing – all yours in Christ. And for his sake you will enjoy this great inheritance with all your brothers and sisters in Christ forever.

And to ensure that you would receive this rich inheritance, he gave you his Word of truth. This too is a great gift. Sadly, despite all the evangelism and outreach the Christian Church is doing in the world, there are still people who never do get to hear the simple truth of the Gospel. For others what they hear is a legalistic or twisted misrepresentation of it. And it's not just those in the deepest, darkest corners of Africa or undiscovered tribes in the Amazon rainforest. It happens right here in our own country in which children grow up with parents who are atheist, or who are cult members, or who call themselves Christian but never actually feed their faith or instill it in their children. But that's not you. No, the Lord put you in a time and place in which you would hear the whole truth of his Word. However he did it, you made sure that the divine Seed was planted in you – and he made it grow. That is to say, he gave you the gift of faith. Not everyone who hears the Word believes it; but you do. This too is a precious blessing: that by the power of the Holy Spirit – God's work on you – your dark, unbelieving mind was enlightened to know, understand, and trust the truth of God's promises in Christ. And as you continue to hear the Word of truth, the Holy Spirit is at work in you to cause you to grow in Christian faith and virtue.

And this, Paul says, is the Lord's guarantee that you will indeed receive the inheritance he has promised you. You know, when we have a Baptism, the church issues a baptismal certificate. It's an official record of what took place. And part of what makes it official is that there's a raised seal on the paper. It's proof that the document is legitimate, not just something mom and dad conjured up on their computer. No, it's a record of an official act of Christ's Church – and therefore of Christ himself. In a far greater sense, Paul says that you who believe in Jesus have been sealed by God's Holy Spirit. His mark on you is like the fingerprints of the Lord, which he sees and recognizes – “Yep, that's one of mine” – and which you too can see and recognize as proof of the Lord's earnest. As you see the work of the Spirit in your life, calling you repentance, giving you faith in Jesus, giving you deeper insights into God's Word, and empowering you to live as a child of God, this is like the surety or down payment: the part you get now, up front, that tells you the rest of what God has promised is on the way.

All this the Lord has richly given to you in Christ Jesus. And why? Did you in any way deserve it? No, not at all. In fact, every day you go out of your way to make yourself more undeserving of it. But God's love for you never fails. And his continuing grace, mercy, and forgiveness to you in Christ overflow all the more. That's what the Apostle Paul tells you today, that from the Lord to you it's always one great big “Merry Christmas!” and an endless number of “Happy New Years.” May you never forget it. And may we all together thank and praise him for all the blessings he so freely gives to us in Jesus his Son. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!