

# Christophers

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It has seemed good to Jay Rochelle and presumably to the Holy Spirit to celebrate The Festival of the Reformation this year on 25 October, today, six days ahead of schedule. I could have waited, but then who am I to begrudge such eagerness? Plus, I have always been a bit awed by Jay's Vast Connections.

It is impossible for Lutherans to celebrate the Reformation without thinking poignantly about the rest of our divided family in the Roman Catholic Church, where the Reformation began. These days some of us in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA are grappling specifically with one of the most controversial issues that have divided Catholics and Lutherans, the cult of the saints. I would like to pay tribute to that ecumenical effort by preaching this morning about one saint, Saint Christopher.

Martin Luther had mixed feelings about Christopher. Quite apart from the fact that the legend about Christopher was historically unfounded, Luther especially deplored the ways in which saints like Christopher were being used to displace Christ, the only mediator. At the same time Luther cherished the legend about Saint Christopher and said so. He cherished it because it presented such a telling picture of the life of every Christian. Saint Christopher is you and I.

## I.

Most of us, I suppose, have seen pictures of Saint Christopher, maybe in the form of a plastic statuette on some fellow-Christian's dashboard. Here is this sturdy old giant up to his thighs in a raging, foaming torrent of a river, struggling for dear life to make it across. On his shoulders he carries a tiny child, and with all his might he stretches forward to grasp ahold of an overhanging tree on the opposite bank.

What threatens to sink the mighty Christopher is not just the torrential flood. So does the baby. That is something you would never guess by looking at the plastic statuette. The real handicap in the crossing is this fragile-looking baby. The Baby. Christopher after all was in the business of ferrying pilgrims across the hazardous stream. When he first started out with this lightweight passenger, he thought that that would be a piece of cake. But by the time they hit the deep waters, the Baby had become intolerably heavy. It was because of the Child's crushing weight that Christopher was now in peril of going under.

What rendered the Baby so mortally heavy was that he in turn bore the sin of the whole world. The Baby, in other words, is Christ. Offhand, such a burdensome Christ does not seem to be much help, does he? Ah, but then there is the tree. To which you say. But we don't see any tree. Not even the plastic statuette has a tree on it. So then how do we know there is a tree? Well, yes, I suppose that does present a problem.

## II.

Martin Luther used this legend of St. Christopher in a sermon he preached at the Coburg, a fortified castle located just his side of the state-line. Across the state-line lay Augsburg, to which Luther's fellow-reformers would soon be traveling in order to defend their case before church and empire by means of the Augsburg Confession. Luther was not permitted to come along since there was a contract out on his head, so he had to stay behind like a caged lion. But there was one thing he could do as a send-off for his colleagues (most of them laypeople) before they braved the storm which awaited them in Augsburg. He could cheer them on with the encouragement of the gospel. It is in that context, in 1530, that Luther preaches to them about Saint Christopher.

"You should not think," says Luther, probably looking straight at his own prince, who may still have felt a strong dependence upon saints, "that there ever was a man who was called by that name [Saint Christopher] or who actually did what is said about [him.] Rather the human being who devised this legend or fable was without a doubt a fine intelligent person, who wanted to portray this picture for the simple people so that they would have an example and image of a Christian life and how it should be lived.... For a Christian is like a great giant... [She or] he bears a burden which the whole world, which no emperor, king, nor prince could carry. Therefore every Christian is a Christopher, that is, a Christ-bearer." (LW 50: 201-202)

So with one hand Luther takes Saint Christopher away from his prince by demythologizing the saint. But with the other hand he offers Christopher back by re-mythologizing him. Saint Christopher, again alive and well, is now the prince himself—and every Christian saint.

"When a person accepts the faith," says Luther, "[she] does not allow [herself] to think of it as something burdensome. [She] thinks of it as being like a little child, which is beautiful and well formed and easy to carry, as Christopher found. For at first the gospel looks like a fine, pleasant and childlike teaching.... The same thing happened with Christopher. He did not find out how heavy the child was until he got into the deep water.... [There] he came very near to drowning.... All right, then, anybody who has taken upon himself the burden of the Christ, the beloved child, must either carry him all the way across the water or drown; there is no middle way." (Ibid.)

Ah, but there is the tree. Isn't there? Is there?

## III.

"I too," said preacher Luther, "see the good Christopher sinking. Nevertheless he does get through, for he has a tree which he holds onto." And pray, what tree is that? For there is no tree in sight. "This tree," Luther continues, "is the promise." Merely a promise of a tree? Merely somebody's word for it? And what IS the promise? "The promise that Christ will do something remarkable with our suffering." (Ibid.) That is true, Christ does

promise, "In the world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world." (Jn. 16:33) That promise of his is the tree, not very visible and sometimes barely audible. But we do have his Word for it.

What do you know, the tree of promise comes from the same Child who is weighing Christopher down. The two of them, the Child and his tree, go together as a pair. The Child Christ who drags us sinking Christophers down under the weight of his cross is the same Christ who holds out his promise to pull us through, and not only to pull us through but to transform our very sinkings into risings. The world's trouble, he promises, is for his overcoming. Our sinkings are his way to good cheer.

It needs to be said that, with or without the Child on their backs, people already have more of a load than they can ever ferry across the drink. You don't have to be Christ-bearers to go under. That much comes with the journey. No one is unsinkable. True, the Child does add distinctive burdens all his own. Carrying him may make you look foolish, may require you to explain your strange Passenger to your neighbors, may cost you time and money for his church, may even shorten your life. But the biggest difference it makes to have him added to our regular load, him with his weight of the whole world's sin, is that when we go down with him on our backs, he goes with us.

Why does that make the big difference, having him go down with us? Merely because misery loves company? No, but rather because HE IS unsinkable. That is why people are baptized into this Child, not only to be immersed and drowned with him but therefore also to be raised with him, over and over every day and, in the end, forever and ever. There is no crossing without going under, though there is going under without crossing. With the Child on our backs we do both. The Child is not just overload. He overcomes. Hence so do we. We have the tree, his promise.

#### IV

"For this is the Christian art," says Luther, "which we must all learn, the art of looking to the Word and looking away from all the trouble ... that lies upon us and weighs us down." If you stay with my Word, says Christ in today's gospel, you will be home to stay. If you home in on my promise, you will be home free. (Jn. 8:31-36) "For this is the Christian art." The tree, so the heavy Child keeps calling into our ears, the tree, dear Christophers, all eyes on the tree. Don't be hypnotized by the whirlpools, the sinkholes, the alligators, sister Christopher, but glom onto the tree. But you say we can't see the tree for the spray and the mist. Then, brother Christopher, see with your ears. Listen for the promise. "For this is the Christian art."

But at times we can't even hear, for the roar of the rapids. Then sing, says the Child. Sing the Promise. What, you exclaim, sing under water? Why, yes, what else do we think we are doing in this strange chapel, in this dear cramped and crooked crypt, in this catacomb with a view, in this open sepulchre, in this mouth of jonah's whale? What else but singing under water all the way to the tree, Child and all? Good Christophers, isn't that the Christian art?

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