

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

WHO ARE WE ANYHOW?

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)

Heb. 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Analysis by Ron Starenko

1Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs...

5Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. 6But someone has testified somewhere,

*"What are human beings that you
are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?
7 You have made them for a little
while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with
glory and honor,
8 subjecting all things under their feet."*

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰It was fitting that God for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹²saying,

*“I will proclaim your name to my
brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I
will praise you.”*

INTRODUCTION:

We are on a journey here to discover who we are. No small task. The biblical writer starts high with the pre-eminence of Jesus, the eternal Son, who is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being (1:3) – (see my treatment of the prologue to this letter for Christmas Dawn, December 25, 2002), – “the firstborn (1:6), and then moves to the lower, to the company of humankind, those who “perish” and who “wear out like clothing” (1:11). Then, he seems to leave us hanging with the question, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals that you care for them?” (2:6). Or, does he end up assigning humanity to the heights, even to the highest? Read on for the answer to “Who Are We Anyhow?”

DIAGNOSIS: Not As High As We Thought

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Flying High, Then Out of Control*

From the beginning of time human beings have been amazed at their potential. Not without reason. We remain in awe of what we can do, scientists, technocrats, genetic engineers, medical experts that we are, taming the wilderness, the seas, outer space, building cities, conglomerates, communication systems, “nothing outside our control.” At the same time we seem to be out of control, unable to hold our insatiable drive for power, wealth, pleasure in check, capable of horrendous crimes against humanity, plundering also God’s good creation. Who are we anyhow?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Subject to Fearful Powers We Cannot Control*

We are a people who believe we can see everything there is to see, know everything there is to know, still unable to figure ourselves out, unable to come to grips with our blindness. Subject to powers we are helpless to control in a world gone mad, we are somehow alienated from the world we were meant to control, from God whom we were meant to reflect. Who are we anyhow?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Victimized By a Power That Controls Us*

Falling pell-mell, we find ourselves subject to the power of sin and wrath as we “drive away” (2:1) from the humanity God intended for us in the beginning, where now all of our best is “crowned” (2:7) with death. Our glory has now become our shame. Who can deny that when all is said and done, humanity struggles in vain to escape the divine verdict of death? Who can deny our failure to be the crown of God’s creation and become the glory for which we were created; that we are now “lower than the

angels" (2:7) for longer than a little while? Is that finally who we are destined to be, and nothing more ever?

PROGNOSIS: Higher Than We Could Imagine

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *First, the Depths*
After eons of evolution and civilization we continue our descent to what is lower, unless we are given "a vision beyond ourselves, to a Lord who sustains all things by his powerful word" (1:3), to one who himself also "for a little while was made lower than the angels" (2:9), where we mortals struggle. When the Highest "falls" to the lowest place, goes where no one can go and rise to tell about it, we behold the "Majesty on high" (1:3), our Lord Jesus Christ. In the end all things must become subject to God, all evil powers, all judgment, even God's wrath, all that holds us in the depths, in the bondage of death, all have become subject to God and to the Son who has tasted "death for everyone" (2:9). Jesus' "suffering of death" (2:9) on the cross was the crowning glory of God who abolished those who were doomed to die, those who could not escape God's judgment unless there was Someone holy and powerful enough to change the fate of humanity. "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings" (2:10). Across the screen of our lives—lives mired in sorrow and fear—flashes the image of who we are in Jesus Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Then, the Vision*

The greatness we imagine in ourselves is an illusion. What we are given to see and believe in Jesus Christ is beyond our imagination, because when "we do see Jesus" (2:9) we see ourselves transformed, "crowned with glory and honor" (2:9). By the faith that is given us we see ourselves now as part of a new

humanity. Joined to the Holy Spirit's sanctifying grace (1:11), "we put our trust" (2:13) in God. Indeed, Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist are the signs of that sanctifying grace, as the Holy Spirit unites us with Jesus Christ to share all that he is, his exalted glory, his rule over all things, which are not only subject to him but to us as well. We have a new vision of who we are.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *The Highest Compliment*

What greater compliment could be given to us mortals, who fell from grace and imagined that we could reach the heights by our own rise to power, than to have the One who is God, who tastes death for us and now through whom all things exist, proclaim to us that he "is not ashamed to call (us) brothers and sisters" (2:11)? So, that's who we are: beings reaching for what God would have us be, living at peace with one another, caring for the earth for the common good of all, remembering those who follow us, becoming ourselves "the reflection of God's glory" (1:3), higher than the angels, on par with the One who is crowned with honor and glory forever!