

# The Nativity of Our Lord (II)/Christmas Day, Epistle, Year A

GETTING OUR “BUT” IN CHURCH ON CHRISTMAS DAY

Titus 3: [3], 4-7, [8]

The Nativity of Our Lord (II)/Christmas Day

Analysis by Chris Repp

[3For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.] 4But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. [8The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone.]

Author’s Note: Context is everything, hence the bracketed verses included in this pericope.

DIAGNOSIS: Led Astray

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Bad Works

It’s Christmas! There’s the baby in the manger. Finally, after all this waiting! We love the Christmas story—the shepherds, the angels, the manger scene. We come to church on Christmas morning to bask in the good cheer, and to sing the familiar Christmas

hymns that we've so scrupulously kept out of our observance of Advent. The Christmas tree and the pericopes have been trimmed. Let's celebrate! "See your salvation comes!" Isaiah proclaims in our first reading. "The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice," says the Psalm. And then comes this little snippet from Titus: thanks to God's loving kindness, our Savior has appeared. Nice! Shall we move on to the gospel reading now? Let's hear about the shepherds, the angels, and the manger. But wait. This reading begins with "But..." It's pointing to something that we didn't hear in our reading this morning. Back up a second. What does it say? "Foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to passions and pleasures, despicable, and hating one another." All of it attached to "we."

#### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Slaves

Now wait a minute. It says "we" were "once" this way, meaning we are no longer "slaves to passions" and all those other things. And, besides, Christmas is a family celebration. Those things before the "but" don't sound very family-friendly. And they're not very cheery either. So let's not spoil our fun. Today is a day for opening presents, eating a nice meal, maybe having a drink or two, and enjoying a little time with our loved ones, all starting with church, of course.

#### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Dead

Don't tell me I'm kidding myself when I deny that that list of terrible things applies to me, or that my traditional, wholesome celebration of Christmas is some sort of ironic confirmation that I'm missing the point. Just because I want a nice day for myself and my family doesn't mean that I'm a slave to my "passions." And why do you even want to bring up all of this, today of all days, and in church? At least I'm here today. Most people are so wrapped up in themselves that they wouldn't even consider coming to church on Christmas and interfering with the Christmas morning traditions at home, if they ever go to church

at all, or even believe in God in this modern secular world. Don't you think I deserve even a little credit for that? I'm one of the good guys, for heaven's sake! I'm on God's side. It's not like I'm God's enemy.

[We shall leave our well-intended, hypothetical narrator here and cross over to the other side of the matrix to see what good news we might find for him. (He was a him in this writer's imagining, but you are welcome to make him a her, or even a singular "they" if you wish.) The difficulty is that the writer of Titus wishes for him, and all of us, to end up in a similar place—celebrating God's grace in the gift of a Savior. But to do that we must actually allow this savior to be the Savior, and not merely a cheerleader for our self-righteousness, which must of course go-along with our pride in our good works. Because trusting in them, in ourselves, is not the way to life. Rather the opposite, I'm afraid. And that of course is why we must get our "but" in church, or we might miss what God is up to.]

PROGNOSIS: Saved

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Reborn

Jesus the Christ whose birth we celebrate today has come not merely to trigger sentimental emotions and holiday good cheer. He is God's intervention in the world and in our lives, which will lead him to the cross, a victim of our foolishness, our malice, our sinful disregard for justice and righteousness. He intervenes in order to save us from ourselves.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Heirs

Because of his death and resurrection, we too are enabled to die to ourselves and to be reborn by the Spirit. But because we die in him, joined to him in his death and so in his resurrection (Romans 6), our rebirth is as heirs – children now of his heavenly Father, sisters and brothers of Christ, and members of

the family of God. You wanted a family Christmas? Here it is. Only this family is not defined by genetics, but by the cross.

#### Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Good Works

Good works flow naturally out of this process of death and rebirth. Like a toddler we learn to walk on our new legs, our new uprightness takes some getting used to as a way of life. Yes, we will fall, and by the grace of God we will get back up again. So we need some encouragement, maybe even some insistence (v. 8) from the family of God, because those good works are profitable—not for us, but for everyone, for the common good. This is what the life that God created us for looks like, the life that we are reborn into, the life that is our endless hope. Aren't you glad you got your "but" in church today?