

J. D. Ousley  
Sermon—23Dec18  
Christmas  
“Birthright”

*In the Name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen.*

We have all seen television shows where the police arrest a criminal and they say to him: “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided for you at government expense.”

In our country, every citizen has the right to be judged fairly, just as we have the rights of free speech and freedom to practice our religion.

In America these are held to be “inalienable” rights. This means that the rights cannot become “alien” to us. If I am arrested I only need to talk to the police without a lawyer if I choose to; the police are even obligated to provide a lawyer if I want one. That’s my inalienable right; I was born with it as a citizen of this constitutional democracy.

Those of us who are Americans treasure these beliefs because we know there are many countries where the people live under the rule of dictators, and they don’t have such rights.

On the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he was already under the threat of two tyrants. The Christmas story tells how Mary and Joseph were compelled to travel to Bethlehem from their native region of Galilee in order to have their names recorded in an official census.

Now, this journey was required by Caesar, the absolute ruler of the Roman Empire. Then, in a later part of the Christmas story, another dictator, King Herod, began a persecution that forced Christ’s parents to flee to the neighboring country of Egypt.

Scholars disagree about some of the details of these accounts of the early life of Jesus. But the descriptions of Christ’s birth in the Gospels help to explain a feature of Christ’s teaching that everyone agrees was there. Against the political tyrants of his age, Christ taught that each person was uniquely valued by God. Each of us has essential rights given us by God.

Now, of course, one can be a skeptic about religion and still believe in human dignity. But Christianity teaches that human beings are children of God who can find an inner freedom. We are given a freedom in our souls that no government could grant – and that no government can take away.

In the Christmas story, an angel says to the shepherds, “to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

That’s a funny choice of words, isn’t it? For while we could say that Christ was “born to” Mary, his mother, we wouldn’t necessarily say that he was “born to” a group of shepherds out in the fields.

Yet the first worshippers in the manger learned that what the angel said was true. Jesus was “of the house and lineage of David”. But Christ also was “born to” those who gathered at the manger. And he was “born to” us; our birthright as children of God gives us the chance to transcend our human nature.

At Christmas time, I like to tell visitors about our historical links with one of the world’s favorite Christmas carols. Toward the end of the 19th century, Phillips Brooks was rector of Trinity Church in Boston and later became Bishop of Massachusetts; one of his brothers, Arthur, was rector of this parish. Bishop Brooks frequently came to stay with him next door in our Rectory.

125 years ago, Brooks was the best-known preacher in the entire Episcopal Church. When he died, members of this parish paid the Tiffany Company to design and build the magnificent memorial you see on the wall of our church to your right.

Yet today, Bishop Brooks is best remembered not for his preaching but as the writer of the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

Phillips Brooks loved to travel and on more than one occasion in his life, he saw for himself the actual town of Bethlehem. Yet more important, I think, for the writing of the carol than those visits to the Holy Land was his personal experience of the One who was born in that little town.

For Bishop Brooks, Christ was the heart of his faith. Christ helped him go beyond his merely human nature. Christ made him the person he was.

And Brooks believed that if Christians also put Christ at the center of its life, factional disputes about how to interpret various doctrines could be put aside. The “high church” and “low church” parties that were tearing the Episcopal Church apart during the nineteenth century could stop fighting if they turned together to the holy Child.

Brooks himself could see truth in both factions; like the Evangelicals, he loved the Bible, and he was drawn again and again to the portraits of Jesus in Scripture. Like the Anglo-Catholics, he believed that a strong institutional church was necessary to carry out major reforms in society.

But Phillips Brooks himself was a member of the “Broad Church” movement within Anglicanism; the Church of the Incarnation also played an historic role in this movement working for the abolition of slavery and the advancement of women.

An important common premise of the Broad Church movement was its belief that Christ always leads us beyond where we are. We can gauge our spiritual health by whether or not we feel we are making progress in becoming the persons God wants us to be.

So Phillips Brooks once challenged the members of his congregation with these words (and these words are challenging to us):

“Is your life decreasing or increasing? Is it growing richer or poorer? The ordinary cheap philosophies assume that life is like a fire which speedily reaches the fullness of its heat, and then fades and fades until it goes out. The high philosophy which gets its light from God, on the other hand, believes that life, as it moves deeper and deeper into God, must move from richness to richness...

“All that we are gives us mere suggestions of the richness which our being will attain. Those moments make our real, effective, enthusiastic life. They create the fulfillment of their own hopes and dreams. Cherish them!” Bishop Brooks says, “Believe that no person lives at his best to whom life is not becoming better and better, always aware of greater and greater...deeds and joys!”

We aren’t confined then by the status into which we were born. However stuck we feel in life, God can help us to move forward. There is no rut so deep that we can’t climb out of it.

Jesus said, “you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” To know Christ isn’t having our minds imprinted with a set of dogmatic beliefs. Rather, we are able to advance further and further into the mysteries of mind and soul, of life and love, of human and divine.

This promise is our inalienable spiritual birthright. Because Christ is “born in us,” we always have new chances for new life in his life.

In the words of Phillips Brooks’ carol:

“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.”

*Amen.*