

2nd Sunday after Christmas (A)

(Eph 1:3-6.15-18 / Jn 1:1-18)

05.01.2014

Born again

As we continue to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus it is an amazing and a puzzling thing to realise that none of us remembers his or her own birth. Until the day of our death, our birth remains the most traumatic event in our lives and yet it has left no trace in our conscious memory.

Today in our readings, St Paul tells us that we have become adopted sons and daughters of God and St John's Gospel assures us that we have been given the power to become children of God.

God's adoption is for each one of us a new birth, a re-birth in Jesus Christ. With Nicodemus we can ask: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (Jn 3:4)

Nicodemus' problem is that he looks at this question from the wrong angle: spiritual rebirth is not about us entering a second time our mother's womb, it is about Christ entering into us. As the famous carol *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* puts it, Christ is "born to give us second birth". Our rebirth is about Christ being born within us. To be a born again Christian, and this is what we all should be, means for us to welcome Christ within us and to allow him to grow to his full stature.

Christ's seed of new life is planted within us at our baptism, when according to St Paul, we "are saved (...) by the water of rebirth by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). And yet Christ's birth within us is not a one-off event, it is everyday that we have to make it our own experience. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm believed that our "main task in life is to give birth to our self". And indeed it is everyday that we have to choose life, to give birth to our new self. We have a huge responsibility in this domain because the way we deal with our wounds and the choices we make shape our new self.

We are not thrown into the world at the whims of fate, God's grace, like the manna in the desert, is given to us everyday so that we may become more and more like Christ who became like us in every respect (Cf. Heb 2:17).

The second point which is not without analogy with our physical birth is that our rebirth in Christ cannot be painless. The child's coming out of its mother's womb is a delicate, dangerous and painful operation. In the same way we cannot expect our rebirth in Christ to be simple, smooth and easy. Sometimes people imagine that faith makes life and death automatically easy. Sometimes people think that because we believe, we should not have to make our way through troubles and trials, we should not be afraid of death. Our rebirth to new life in Christ is a long and challenging process, it takes courage and endurance to be true to God and to oneself. We can be sure that our self-centredness, our weakness and our sin put up a strong resistance to the birth and the growth of Christ within us. Only our complacency can sometimes transform our rebirth into a cosy and ineffective performance.

Another difficult aspect is that, like the baby who comes out of the womb and faces an unknown world with fear and panic, so too our rebirth in Christ is a step out into the unknown. As we put our hand in God's hand, we do not really know where he is going to lead us.

Very often our fear to face the reality of our world and to deal with it prevents us from choosing life. Unfortunately, we can be very good at sinning just by doing nothing. I think that it is what Martin Luther King meant when he said: "At the end, most of us will have to repent, not of the great evils we have done, but simply of the great apathy that has prevented us from doing anything."

The third point which is also connected to our human birth is that just as babies cannot be born on their own, relying on their own strength, our rebirth in Christ does not depend on us alone.

Just as babies need their mother and people around them in order to survive, so too do we need God and others with us in order to grow in faith. Only in the fellowship of the Church can we learn to speak, to think and to behave as Christians. It is certainly a humbling thing for us who are always tempted

to believe that we can do better on our own to realise this and yet it is the only way for us to be born again to new life. Maybe we can survive on our own, but we cannot become a human being and a Christian on our own.

If 2000 years after it we continue to commemorate Jesus' birth, it is not only in order to organise parties and to exchange gifts... Christ is born so that we may be born again to true life. We have to remember that our rebirth is about life. Jesus "came that we may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

In our first reading, St Paul prays that God may "enlighten the eyes of our mind so that we can see what hope his call holds for us". Each birth is really an act of hope, a challenge to death, a victory over despair and bleakness. Our rebirth *par excellence* is the victory of Christ within us: his victory over all the powers which enslave and prevent us from being fully alive.

The reality of life reminds us constantly that we do not live to the full and in a way this is alright. But sadly there are too many men and women who barely survive, who do not dare to live, there are too many lives which are not lived.

As Christians, our mission is to share with of our brothers and sisters in humanity the good news that life is worth living. With Christ and his Gospel, in the Church, amidst the troubles of our lives, we are given the grace to be born again and again and again.

With St Paul, we believe that for us who are born out of God's loving kindness, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rm 8:15).