

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Saturday, December 24, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

"Let your attitude to life be that of Christ Jesus Himself. For He, Who had always been God, did not cling to His rights and privileges as God, but stripped Himself of every advantage by consenting to become a slave, and be born as a human being. And He humbled Himself even further, going so far as actually to die a criminal's death on a cross."

THE VERDICT OF THE COURT

Why did our Lord Jesus Christ suffer all that indignity and pain? Because He loved us and wanted to save us. Suffering love -- that is what Christmas is all about. The old Gospel hymn puts it like this:

"God loved the world of sinners lost, and ruined by the Fall;
Salvation full, at highest cost, He offers free to all.
Oh, 'twas love, 'twas wondrous love!
The love of God to me;
It brought my Savior from above,
To die on Calvary."

A very powerful and moving expression of the suffering love of God is found in a play written shortly after the conclusion of World War II by a German Lutheran pastor named Guenter Rutenborn. The setting of the play is in devastated Germany, and the whole production is an attempt to discover who was to blame for the awful atrocities that took place during the war years when, for example, no less than six million Jewish people were systematically murdered in the gas chambers.

The obvious culprits are suggested: Hitler, the Gestapo, the bureaucrats, the Jews themselves, and the majority of the nation who, through fear, ignorance or apathy, did not resist such barbarity. Suddenly a man gets up from his seat in the audience, strides down the aisle, bounds up onto the stage, and exclaims defiantly: "You are being very superficial. You are not taking this case back to its ultimate source. Do you want to know who is really to blame? I will tell you. God is. Is not He the One Who made this horrible world? Is not He the One Who entrusted all this power to unworthy hands? It is God's fault!"

At first everyone is shocked by such an accusation, but gradually the idea catches on, and the court agrees wholeheartedly with the verdict. God is found guilty of the crime of creation and the judge pronounces the sentence: "I hereby sentence GOD to have to come and live in this wretched world the way we humans have to do." The three archangels, Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael are sent to execute this sentence.

As Gabriel starts out, he turns and muses out loud: "As GOD serves this sentence, I will see to it that He knows obscurity and shame. He will be born in a barn on the backside

of nowhere, with a peasant girl for a mother. He will know what it feels like to live in an enemy-occupied country. He will experience the stigma of being a Jew in a Jew-hating world; and I'll see to it that there will be suspicion of shame about the very manner of His birth."

As Michael starts off the stage, he turns and muses: "As GOD serves His sentence, I'm going to see to it that He experiences frustration and insecurity. He'll have no place to lay His head. No one, not even His family, will ever fully understand Him. In the end, the very people He wanted to help will turn against Him, and He will know the torturing frustration of being utterly rejected.

As Raphael makes his way off the stage, he also turns and muses: "As GOD serves this sentence, I'm going to see to it that He knows what it feels like to suffer and die in helplessness, ignominy and shame. He will be falsely accused, illegally tried and condemned; He will be cursed, spit upon and tortured. And then He will die the long slow death of a debased and abandoned criminal."

As the third archangel disappears, the house lights go down and all of a sudden it strikes you -- God has already served that sentence! He already knows what it feels like to live as a human being in this kind of world; to suffer in a way we could never even begin to understand; to be disappointed; to die an excruciating death. He knows, because He did it in Christ!

I remember many years ago a fine Christian lady who suffered a severe nervous breakdown. Through an incredible diagnostic mistake, she was committed to a mental institution and placed in a closely-guarded ward in which the most insane patients were confined. She herself was perfectly sane, but there she was, night and day, being subjected to the blood-curdling sounds of their frantic screaming, and the constant trauma of having to be exposed to the bizarre behavior of this group of poor hopeless idiots. This lasted for a whole week until it was finally determined that she had been mistakenly placed in this devastating environment. And after she had completely recovered from the nervous breakdown, she said that during that terrible week amongst the insane, she realized for the very first time in her life something of what it must have meant to the Lord Jesus to leave Heaven's glory, where, from all eternity, He had been the recipient of the adoring worship of an unnumbered angelic host; to come down to the squalor, hatred and shame of a sinful world that despised Him, humiliated Him, and finally nailed Him to a cross on a wind-swept hill.

Do you remember the haunting lines of that beautiful anthem our choir sometimes sings?

"What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
That caused the Lord of life to bear the heavy cross...
That Christ should lay aside His crown for my soul –
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!"

"Let your attitude to life be that of Christ Jesus Himself," says our text. It is interesting to notice that in the New Testament, every time our Lord is referred to as "Christ Jesus," it involves downward divine movement. "Christ" is His heavenly name, as it were; and "Jesus" His earthly name; and when He is described as "Christ Jesus," we see Him coming down from heaven to earth to seek and to save that which is lost." See how this is set forth in our text:

"Let your attitude to life be that of Christ Jesus Himself. For He, Who had always been God did not cling to His rights and privileges as God but stripped Himself of every advantage by consenting to become a slave and be born as a human being." What incredible divine condescension! And all because He loved us so much!

Another beautiful example of the use of His name "Christ Jesus, is found in 1 Timothy 1:15, "How true it is, and how long that everyone should know it, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners!" "To save sinners." You see, His virgin birth can never be separated from His atoning death. He was born to die. Bethlehem is now virtually a suburb of Jerusalem. A dollar bus ride will take you the eight miles from where Christ Jesus was born to where He died.

Did you ever realize that the very word "CHRISTMAS" (which, of course, is never found in the Bible) implies both the birth and the death of our Lord? "CHRIST" -- the eternal God Who became incarnate in the Man, Jesus of Nazareth; and "CHRIST-MASS," or Holy Communion, which has traditionally, from the earliest days of the faith, been celebrated on Christmas Eve, and which speaks of the broken body and the shed blood offered on the Cross as an eternal sacrifice for sin. I make bold to say that the most godly, the most sanctified celebration of "Christmas" is what you and I are doing right now -- gathering as adoring believers around the Lord's Table on Christmas Eve. "CHRISTMAS" -- the eternal God coming to earth to save His people from their sins by shedding His atoning blood and bearing the unspeakable punishment that our sins deserved!

And so, in "Christ Jesus" we see God becoming Man, so that the sons of men might become sons of God.

As now we approach His Table, reflect upon the words of another Gospel hymn -

"He did it for me! He did it for me!
A sinner as guilty as ever could be;
Oh how I love Him, now that I see
He suffered, He died, He did it for me!"

Surely there is only one worthy response to such love; and that is a re-commitment of ourselves to Him in obedient and sacrificial service of others; for it is by being what He was - a servant to our fellow human beings, that we serve Him, our beloved Lord and Master!

"Let your attitude be that of Christ Jesus Himself!"

AMEN.