

Come and Celebrate a New Birth

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the second Sunday of Easter, April 11, 1999. Scripture Lessons: 1 Peter 1:3-9.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The ancient world, 2000 years ago, was so old. We call it the ancient world - it was in fact *ancient: timeworn, aged, doddering, fading, waning, wasting, senescent*. Perhaps the best word to describe the ancient world is *hopeless*. This was brought home to me in reading Tacitus, one of ancient Rome's greatest historians.

I was shocked, first of all, by the number of people who committed suicide in the ancient world. Hardly a page goes by in which we do not read of suicide. "They *sundered their veins... they prayed that the ebbing life might have a quick departure.*" Of another, "he *drank poison, but disgusted at its slowness, he hastened death by severing his veins.*" Of still another, he "adopted the *easiest mode of death then in fashion, (he) opened his veins...*" Many of the most powerful and wealthy families felt hopeless. They committed suicide.

I was not only shocked by the frequency of suicide, I was surprised at how hopeless was their view of the future. Tacitus writes of events taking place around A.D. 65 (about the same time as Peter wrote his letter), "*fears of the future arose . . . impending disasters . . . prodigies in heaven and earth, the warning voices of the thunder, and other intimations of the future . . . Never surely did more terrible calamities of the Roman People, or evidence more conclusive, prove that the Gods take no thought for our happiness, but only for our punishment.*" What a hopeless view of the future and of the pagan gods.

The world was so much older then, it's younger than that now because something new happened in history. Peter, writing ^{From Rome} around A.D. 65, says, "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...*" What a contrast to Tacitus. In Tacitus, hopelessness among the wealthy and the powerful. In the New Testament, hope and "*indescribable and glorious joy*" among the poor and powerless. The ancient world cries out,

"Night and darkness are coming." Peter sings, "Morning has broken . . . Praise with elation, praise every morning, God's recreation of the new day." *The God who made the stars to shine . . .*

Peter wrote as an old man. The average life span was about 45. Peter must have been 70, 80 years old. Old by any standards. But he feels new. He feels like a child. He dreams dreams like a teenager. He sees visions like a young adult. He sees signs of a new creation. Most men his age were saying, "Life is over." Peter rejoices and is filled with indescribable joy. He's still looking forward. "God has given us a new birth. We have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. We are being protected by the power of God."

How can some Christians today be so pessimistic? I heard Tony Campolo comment on the attitude of so many so called Bible believing Christians. "Look how terrible things are. The world is getting worse and worse." They sound like the ancient pagans of whom Tacitus wrote. They write off the world. They abandon the world. "No sense in spending much time or money feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, getting involved in the political process, advocated for fair wages and good working conditions. This world is like the Titanic. Sinking fast." An attitude of despair. Cynicism. Hopelessness for this world. By abandoning the world they're actually making the world worse.

But how can we read the New Testament without having hope for this world? Hope because God raised Jesus *bodily* from the dead. Not spiritually but *bodily*. God, by raising Jesus *bodily* from the dead, has demonstrated his commitment to bodily existence, to this material world. Because of the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus Christians look at the world for signs of the new creation begun with Christ. We do not ignore the misery, the despair, the sin, the evil. But we look for signs of new life.

Paul Tillich wrote, "The message of Christianity is not Christianity, but a New Reality. A New state of things has appeared, it still appears; it is hidden and visible, it is there and it is here. Accept it, enter into it, let it grasp you."

The children we baptize today are signs of a new reality. Of new birth. The early church closely associated baptism with the new birth. Presbyterians also associate baptism with the new

birth. Our new study catechism asks, "What does it mean to be baptized?" The answer. "My baptism means that I am joined to Jesus Christ forever. As I am baptized with water, he baptizes me with his Spirit, washing away all my sins and freeing me from their control. My baptism is a sign that one day I will rise with him in glory and (get this) *may walk with him even now in newness of life.*"

God wants us to walk with him *now* in newness of life no matter how old or young you are. Too many Christians are waiting until they die to walk with him in newness of life. Now is the time to walk with him in newness of life.

You who are in your 70s and 80s and 90s. You *sometimes* feel life has passed you by. You sometimes feel depressed. You sometimes look back with sadness. But, the Gospel proclaims, "The best is yet to be." Before you ~ glorious, wonderful life. "By his great mercy (God) has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." You are included in the "us". And "Although you have not seen (Christ), you love him; and though you do not see him now, you believe in him." So "rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

And you who are teenagers and young adults. Peter's words are addressed to you as well. "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." You are included in the "us". Accept your new birth. Enter into it! Let it grasp you! Be what you are! Children of the living God. Be what God has made you, a new creation!