

The First Sunday of Christmas 2024, Year C

Readings: Jeremiah 31.7-14 , Ephesians 1.3-14, John 1.[1-9]10-18

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

Today on this First Sunday of Christmas, as we continue to dwell in the Season of Christmas enjoying the lights on Christmas trees or along streets and avenues, lighted candles, tasteful decorations, seasonal foods, friends and family we are invited by the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians to think about what it means to be 'in Christ'. I begin with a little arithmetic as we consider today's Ephesian reading which is traditionally attributed to Paul the Apostle and dated to have been during his imprisonment in Rome around 60-62.

In Greek today's Ephesians reading is just one sentence with the phrase 'in Christ' mentioned five times and 'in Him' meaning being in Christ five times as well, ten times all together. What might we surmise from this accumulation of 'in Christ'? It carries weight as it speaks of a new way of being, a new reality in time, a new way of existing. No longer are we simply made in God's image, but rather we dwell **in Him, in Christ.** *A great and mighty wonder* indeed, as we sing in the Christmas Carol with the same name. The words are attributed to Germanus of Constantinople who lived in the 7th century. Germanus wrote the lyrics perhaps after having celebrated Christmas in the Hagia Sophia pondering the mystery of the incarnation.

A great and mighty wonder
a glorious mystery:
a virgin bears an infant
who veils his deity.

The purpose of Christ's first coming is to buy us free. It is to pay a ransom for each and every person from the beginning to the end of time as Germanus writes in another verse,

Since all he comes to ransom,
by all be he adored,

the infant born in Bethl'em,
the Saviour and the Lord.

This verse from *A great and mighty wonder* is based on what we read in the Letter to the Ephesians when Paul the author writes, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us." We are reminded in that verse that our salvation was costly, it was bitter, it was deadly. It was bought at a price. We are also reminded that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God whom we adore lavishes us with the riches of his grace. I am of the mind that it is important to always underline that God is not stingy, miserly, close-fisted, penny-pitching, but as the passage says, generous, abounding in love.

If we look to the first chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians only, the riches of Christ's grace include being privy to the knowledge of God's will, of possessing an eternal inheritance that includes the gift of eternal life through the fulfilment of God's promises as well as the seal of the Holy Spirit. The image of something being sealed means in the context of the letter to the Ephesians that our redemption is complete. No one can snatch it away. It is done. It is accomplished. In John's Gospel Jesus' last words from the cross are simply, "It is finished." It is also in John's gospel that we hear that Jesus has come into the world to testify to the truth, the truth that he is. (John 18:37) This testimony comes with a promise that those who belong to the truth will listen to his voice. This then is a fundamental vocation of the Christian – to listen to Christ's voice as it echoes down the centuries. This is why we are committed to a close reading of the Bible in its entirety.

For those who missed my Christmas sermon another vocation for each us as Christians is to become fully human emulating the example of Jesus. This means something like laying aside all that is contrary to God's will, a commitment to holy living, a commitment you might say to holistic living, which means not just giving attention to our bodies, our diet, our fitness, but will require the same discipline when it comes to spiritual things, to the things of God. On Christmas I quoted a German journalist who said that since in Jesus God became small and became human, we too had the possibility to be human rather than some bad version

of the same. In German through wordplay the idea is expressed well, “Wenn Gott menschlich werden konnte, dann kann auch der Mensch menschlich werden. Das ist die Hoffnung auf die Zeitenwende.” (Heribert Prantl, SZ, 22.12 2024)

This chapter of our salvation is sealed. And because it is sealed Martin Luther speaks of the Freedom of the Christian (Die Freiheit des Christenmenschen) echoing words of St Paul as he says sin has no more dominion over us. (Romans 6:14-23) We are redeemed. But the challenge facing us now and until our last breath is about living in Christ intentionally. Firstly, What might this mean? Secondly, What is required of us? In order to put some flesh on this concept of being in Christ... Here it comes... Wait for it... I asked ChatGPT an AI tool the following question, What does it mean to live in Christ? Provide twelve ways to live in Christ and twelve examples. You heard me correctly, I asked ChatGPT a question. I will share some of the results with you.

The answer given was exhaustive. After providing twelve ways of living in Christ qualified by what each meant and giving an example for each as asked, ChatGPT (kindly?) provided a summary. “Living **in Christ** is a holistic way of life that encompasses faith, love, obedience, and service. It involves making Christ the centre of your thoughts, decisions, and actions, allowing His presence to transform you into His likeness and glorify God in all that you do.”

The twelve ways of living in Christ were: Abide in God’s Word, Pray Without Ceasing, Obey God’s Commandments, Walk by the Spirit, Bear Fruit, Love Others as Christ loved, Renew your Mind, Seek First the Kingdom of God, Serve Others, Live with Eternal Perspective, Be a Witness for Christ, Trust in Christ Daily.

The twelve ways of being in Christ were enriched by spelling out the meaning and by also providing an example. In order to prevent overload I choose six of the twelve,

4. Walk by the Spirit

To Walk by the Spirit means allowing the Holy Spirit to guide your actions and decisions.

Example: When feeling angry, pray for self-control and respond with patience instead of reacting harshly (Galatians 5:22-23).

5. Bear Fruit

To bear fruit means to live a life that reflects the character of Christ and produces spiritual growth.

Example: Demonstrate kindness by helping a struggling coworker or volunteering to serve the poor.

6. Love Others as Christ Loved

Love Others as Christ Loved means showing selfless love and compassion for others.

Example: Forgive someone who hurt you deeply, mirroring the love and forgiveness Christ showed on the cross.

7. Renew Your Mind

Renew Your Mind means replacing worldly thinking with godly thinking.

Example: Instead of dwelling on negativity or fear, meditate on Philippians 4:8 and focus on what is true, noble, and praiseworthy.

8. Seek First the Kingdom of God

Seek First the Kingdom of God means to prioritise God's will and purposes above all else.

Example: Decline a lucrative job that would compromise your values or faith in favour of one that honours God's principles.

9. Serve Others

Serve Others means follow Christ's example of humility by putting others' needs before your own.

Example: Offer to babysit for a single parent who needs rest or help a neighbour with chores without expecting anything in return.

Living in Christ is a way of being Christian as ChatGPT wrote in the introduction, “To live “in Christ” means to have a close, personal, and ongoing relationship with Jesus, grounded in faith, trust, and obedience. It involves identifying with Christ in His death and resurrection, abiding in Him daily, and allowing His life and teachings to shape every aspect of our being.”

In conclusion some of the thoughts that have flashed past us. There is vocation as a Christian to become human in such a way that it corresponds with the Christian gospel. This becoming human is nurtured and fed by dwelling in Christ actively, responsively through listening to the truth that is Christ. We do this listening by giving attention to different moments of being Christian as GhatGPT listed answering question I. Let us list them. I ask you to choose one to focus on. Abiding in God’s Word, Praying Without Ceasing, Coming under God’s Commandments, Walking by the Spirit, Bearing Fruit [that will last] , Loving Others as Christ loved [us], Renewing our Minds, Seeking First the Kingdom of God, Serving Others, Living [in an] Eternal Perspective, Being a Witness for Christ, Trusting in Christ Daily. Each of us will prioritise, but today we need to learn to live again with an eternal perspective in Christ. In the renewing of our minds ChatGPT suggested we spend time thinking about a verse from the Letter to the Philippians (4.8),

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. **Amen.**