

Feast of the Holy Name 2023

Happy Feast of the Holy Name.

It is an oddly titled feast, but it used to be odder.

The '29 prayer book called it the Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Canadian Prayer book still lists it as “The Octave Day of Christmas, and the Circumcision of Our Lord, being New Year’s Day.”

Our '79 prayer book removed the circumcision part.

Americans became squeamish, I suppose.

In general, we are less in touch with the soil and all things earthy.

The reason for the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Name today is that, in Jewish tradition, male children were circumcised and formally named eight days after their birth, and today is the eighth day of Christmas.

Theologically, the circumcision of Jesus has been seen by some as underscoring his obedience to the law, though one would think Jesus had little say in the matter.

Spiritual obedience is often taken to mean submission to someone else’s orders, as if God commanded Jesus to be circumcised and commanded him to be crucified, and Jesus dutifully assented like a soldier sent into battle.

People in turn think of the final judgment as a time when their success in obeying the various commands is tallied—a kind of black and white moral accounting of the plusses and minuses in the holy ledger.

A balance of plus one, and you squeak into heaven.

The philosopher, Crispin Sartwell, recently wrote an article considering whether he had been good or bad in the past year.¹

He then imagines himself standing before the final judgment, and argues facetiously that what is important, what should get him into the good place, is all the bad that he could have done, but did not—an absence of potential minuses rather than a balance of plusses.

Tongue in cheek as this is, his article nevertheless assumes a black and white moral accounting.

The theology of Jesus as the model of obedience to an external authority presents two problems.

First, Jesus is an incarnation of God, so it is not an external authority that he is obeying, but his own internal sense of what is right.

The same is true of us, who are also emanations of God.

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/30/opinion/good-evil-ethics-argument.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Our sense of right and wrong might be stimulated by things exterior, but ultimately, it relies upon our internal guide.

Second, positing God as something outside of ourselves, even foreign to us, is inaccurate and lets us off the hook of discerning each minute what is most loving.

It leads us to believe that we just need to find the right list of rules and follow them unquestioningly.

People turn to the Bible or church doctrine or some other external source to justify their authority over the lives of others, much as the scribes and Pharisees did.

In the search for secular power, they may rely upon clobber verses as weapons.

Entire churches start to see this as their mission, trapped in a net of black and white weave.

The Bible certainly serves as reference and inspiration, but the final word is God's, and God is found in the present.

We cannot hope to be very loving ourselves when we see God as an arbitrary and demanding taskmaster who smites those who do not follow the rules.

In reality, we each bear the sacred spark.

The voice within is not foreign, like a possessing demon, but is part of our own being.

It is self-authenticating, as theologian E. Stanley Jones wrote.²

2 E. Stanley Jones, *A Song of Ascents* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1979), p. 190.

It has an inimitability about it.

It is the vibrational ground of our very being, and nothing else vibrates in the same way. Acting in harmony with the frequency of our own holy nature results in a more peaceful, loving outlook.

In doing so, sometimes we are called to set things right that have gone off course.

I was impressed by a story about Martin Luther.

Shortly after Luther arrived at a new parish, a man there committed suicide and, as a result, the church refused to bury him in hallowed soil.

Bucking centuries of practice, Luther refused to obey the external authority and followed instead the divine voice within.

He dug the grave in the churchyard with his own hands.

When people do hateful things in the name of God, like those who were about to stone the adulteress they brought before Jesus, they are not listening to that inner voice, not acting in harmony with the internal vibration of their being.

I recall when a very poor woman at church in New York announced to me and one of the leaders of the church they she had swept and cleaned that day at a local salon in exchange for some hair coloring.

She shared with us how excited she was to go home that evening and fix herself up a bit.

The other woman snarled, “It’s a sin!”

I was so stunned, I did not know what to say to the one snarling.

I have shared with you that it is one of my lifelong frustrations that I cannot think of what to say until much later.

I did at least manage to tell the woman who wanted to cover her roots that I was happy for her.

Only profound pain could so alienate the angry woman from herself, from that inner voice, such that she could be that cruel.

In seeking to control, people who are alienated from themselves spread alienation to others by telling them that their inner voice is wrong.

We can imagine that, early in life, such people were made to feel unsafe by those who should have protected them.

The result is that they seek to control the frightening world.

They turn from seeking harmony to seeking power in order to defend themselves and, as a result, become locked in a relationship with something exterior that seems certain and clear.

They rely on black and white rules as a form of protection.

Some become so enamored of power that they intentionally try to kill the spirit within others, as the spirit leads others to resist their power.

From such extremely alienated people we must distance ourselves to the best of our ability.

In reality, the world is not black and white, but most often gray and we must discern moment by moment what honors God, what will bring about harmony between all of us various instantiations of God in the world.

Judgment is not an accounting, a tallying of rights and wrongs, but an assessment of our growth, of how we have come to relate to the whole.

In the church, we create a safe place to reclaim our sense of peace by respecting unique individuals and the gifts that they bring.

In such an environment, people learn to respect themselves and others.

This helps to promote healing so that people can access the voice inside.

It can be a slow process, but being in process is the point.

Jesus showed the way.

He was obedient to that voice, to the aspect of him that was God.