

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, A – January 18, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Masses – 780 words

This passage from the gospel of John is such an important one, in a way that we might not immediately notice. Saint John the Baptist proclaims that Jesus has come to take “away the sin of the world”. That is, he has not come merely to take away or cancel sin’s punishment, but to remove sin itself. And since it would not make much sense to take away sin only for us to fall back into it, it implies, too, that Christ has come to help form us in virtue (which he does by his grace), so that we will not sin any longer.

Perhaps this teaching does not immediately seem so important; but as we understand better our readings, we might see the crucial distinction. For Christ identifies with the people he came to save so fully, that he brings us in to his own reality. And there, there is no room for sin to remain: it is not enough to cover over the dung hill with snow, to give us a cosmetic touch-up. No: he wills to transform us from within in a radical way, for nothing that is impure may enter the holy of holies, the heavenly sanctuary.

An attentive study of our first reading reveals this – a passage from one of the “Servant Songs” of the Prophet Isaiah. In it, the Lord addresses his “servant”, who would be a light to the nations and bring salvation to all. Yet interestingly, at one point he calls his servant “Israel”. Normally, we understand Israel to be God’s chosen people, the fulfillment of which is found in his Church. But here, the servant himself is also called Israel, meaning he fully identifies with those for whom he would be light and salvation.

But this is not a novelty; it aligns with the Jewish understanding of who the king was: he was the embodiment of his people. Perhaps you’ve heard of King Louis XIV of France, the so-called “Sun King” of the 17th century, who famously scoffed, “L’état, c’est moi” – “The state, it is I” – “I am the state”. He said such a thing as what we would call an “empty suit”. He was corrupt and ruled at his people’s expense; we could speculate that we remember him today mostly because he had fine taste in architecture.

But our Lord Jesus Christ was the true servant foretold by God, who would embody his people by identifying totally with them, with us – by becoming one of us in all things but sin, yet confronting our sinful condition and defeating it in his own person. He would not rule at our expense, but expend himself in our service. And by giving us baptism and the other sacraments, he would unite us with himself in a profound way, building us up into a temple more beautiful and more lasting than any earthly chateau.

Yes, this truly and necessarily meant that Christ would save us from our sin by destroying it and casting it out. We must remember this whenever we think about our baptism and our subsequent sacramental confessions: Jesus nails our sin to the cross! He destroys it; it is no more. And then, he gives us his grace in its place. And that grace, when we cooperate with it, helps us to avoid falling back into our prior disgrace. There are many struggles along the way. But he desires to make us fit for our heavenly home.

Our psalm response was, “Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will”: we should pray in this Mass, as Jesus comes to us once again while we assist at his saving sacrifice, to have the “ears open to obedience” spoken of by the psalmist; to find “delight” in doing God’s will. It is only possible with the help of his grace. And so we, too, “wait for the Lord”, as the psalmist sang, who will not only give us that grace, but who will transform us profoundly from within by means of it, destroying our sin in the process.

Following upon last week’s Feast of the Baptism of the Lord and also on John’s own witness to Christ’s baptism in the gospel, we think of a practical and concrete way we can apply the lessons of today’s readings. It comes down to renewing our baptismal commitment each day

– rejecting Satan and sin, and living out our faith in God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our faith in his one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church – with the help of all the saints. Thus Jesus will destroy sin in us, and we will become more like him, who wills to identify fully with us.