



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Crossing the River"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Isaiah 65:17-25
Epistle 1 Thessalonians 5:16-28
Gospel John 1:6-8,19-28

During my recent trip to England for the wedding of my godson, I was able to spend two days in London on my way north: the first time in a number of years that I got to really experience that great city. One of the joys of staying at the home of the former ambassador Paul Dimond and his wife Caroline was its location just down the street from Westminster Abbey: one of the most famous churches in the world and a wonderful, fantastic place that is at once a museum, a cemetery and a functioning, thriving Christian place of worship. As Caroline Dimond and I walked through the abbey, she showed me a recent discovery that archeologists had made at the door of the south transept leading to the cloisters: restorers had come across a huge painting of St Christopher just under the old layers of whitewash on the wall. It wasn't a complete surprise, however, since it was a common custom in the Middle Ages to paint a huge figure of this saint at a church door- you can see this in many of the oldest colonial churches here in the Philippines. It was believed that gazing on St Christopher would as one left church would safeguard him or her from accidents that day. For good or ill, this particular saint has been degraded in recent years: from being one of the most popular figures in Christian lore, he is now treated only as a legend by the Roman Catholic Church- but what a wonderful legend it is!

The ancient story tells us that he was a giant who lived by a river and earned his living by carrying travelers to the other side. His life-long goal was to find the most worthy master of all and serve him the rest of his life. One day, a small child came to him and asked for passage, but when they got to the middle of the river, the giant was amazed to find that the child now weighed so much that he could hardly walk with him on his shoulders. "Why are you so heavy?" asked the giant; and the child replied, "I am Jesus, the Savior, and you are carrying me as a little child on your shoulders, but on my shoulders I am carrying the sins the world. I am the king you're looking for." From that day on, the giant was known as *Khristo-pheros*, "the Christ-Bearer", and is said to have died a martyr's death in the service of his new King.

In today's readings, there is reference to another river, the River Jordan. It is the place where the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land. It is also the place where John the Baptizer chose to enact his rite of washing- and that probably wasn't by accident, either. Through the waters of the river, the Israelites were "born again" into a new life of freedom and fulfillment. Through the waters of the river, the followers of John renewed their lives and their commitment. Through the waters of the river, Jesus himself submitted to the rite of baptism in order to identify with those who were seeking a new Promised Land- a land that he would lead them to. It is not for nothing that the early Christians made their baptismal fonts so that those being baptised could walk down into the water and then walk back up again on the other side- they were in a sense crossing a river themselves- a river of new life by reliving in their own lives the Death and Resurrection of Christ.

St Paul in writing about baptism tells us "whoever has been baptised into Christ has put on Christ". The image is of putting on a new set of clothes, of "wearing" Christ, or carrying him in our hearts, in our minds and in our bodies. Paul echoes today's Old Testament passage in which Isaiah says, "The Lord...has clothed me in the garments of salvation, he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity, like a bridegroom wearing his wreath, like a bride adorned in her jewels." But there is a somber side to this new set of clothes- this new burden we take on. We are called upon to become "Christophers" ourselves: "Christ-bearers" who take upon ourselves Christ's weight: sometimes that of a child, sometimes that of the cares and worries of the whole

world. Some might say that it is Jesus who carries *us*, but it is equally true to say that Jesus invites *us* to share the load, sharing the pain and sharing the joy, as we cross through the rivers of our lives: escaping slavery, entering a new life, accepting the adventure and the challenge of the Christian faith with all it brings.

On this day when the Church commends us in St Paul's words to "Rejoice in the Lord always!" let part of our joy be the burden we choose to take up- the burden of the little child, and the burden of the world's care. Don't put either of them down, not until you have crossed the river.