

Christ-Bearer

The Story of Saint Christopher

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Once upon a time there was a man named Reprobus, which means Outcast. He was very big, very strong, very ugly, very smart, and very ambitious. His ambition was to serve the greatest king in the world. Unfortunately he lived in Canaan, which was a two-bit sort of place, where the girls giggled at him, the lads in the bar were always trying to take him down a notch or two, and the king spent his days combing his hair.

So Reprobus left Canaan, and walked until he came to the court of a very great king, one who knew the value of size and strength and brains when he saw them. This king gave Reprobus a good job and ordered all his subjects on the pain of something pretty painful not to make any bad jokes about looks. For a while Reprobus served happily, keeping order where the king wanted order kept, and extending the king's domains where the king wanted them extended. One day, however, Reprobus saw his master cross himself when the devil was mentioned.

"What did you do that for?" asked Reprobus.

"To protect myself," replied the king. "That devil is a dangerous chap."

"Aha!" cried Reprobus. "You're afraid of the devil? Then he must be greater than you are. I am off to serve him. Goodbye."

Reprobus went looking for the devil. As he was trudging through a blazing desert, a fierce man rushed up and yelled,

"Hey, you looking for trouble?"

"No," said Reprobus. "I'm looking for a great king called the devil. I want to serve him."

"The devil!" exclaimed the fierce man. "Hey, that's me. I accept your service. What's your name? Reprobus? Sweet!"

Off they went, arm in arm, and for a while Reprobus did the devil's bidding on battlefields and in bars, in great cities and in wretched little villages--wherever. On Sundays they generally dined in hell. Strange to say, none of this was as satisfying as Reprobus had expected it to be, and hell was actually rather a shocking place, worse than Canaan even, so he looked sharp one day when they came to a roadside cross and his master began to tremble.

"What's the matter?" asked Reprobus.

"That cross," said the devil in a quavery voice, "that cross is the sign of Christ. I'm afraid of him."

"Hey," said Reprobus, "if that's your problem, then I want to serve this Christ. Where is his palace?"

"He's everywhere," said the devil, looking around nervously.

"What kind of answer is that?" asked Reprobus with a rather threatening look, at which the devil burst into tears and couldn't say another word.

Reprobus said goodbye and went searching for Christ, which proved harder than he expected. Christ might be everywhere, as the devil had said, but for a long time Reprobus encountered nothing but shrugs, smirks, and occasional rude remarks when he asked about this great king. At last, however, he found a hermit who claimed to know something and was willing to talk. It took quite a while--the idea that Christ didn't have much of an army and had ended up crucified didn't appeal to Reprobus at first--and even when he began to understand, he was puzzled.

"If Christ is the lord of the world and also served me by dying to save me from sin, what can I possibly do to serve him?" he asked.

"You can fast and pray, as I do," replied the hermit.

"I'm not fitted for those things," said Reprobus, who knew himself pretty well.

"Then you can serve by helping others," said the hermit. "Many people drown trying to cross that river you see down there, but you are big enough and strong enough to carry them over on your shoulders. Do that."

"Will Christ come down now and then to pat me on the back the way the great king and the devil used to?" asked Reprobus.

"Maybe," said the hermit.

Reprobus built a shelter on the river bank, cut himself a staff for wading, and carried people over the river, never refusing even when it was past midnight, or when the people were very fat or very dirty or covered with sores or even when they were so ungracious as to make bad jokes about his person. Strange to say, he was very happy in his humble work.

One day a child appeared and asked to be taken across.

"Go home to your mother," said Reprobus rather sternly.

"My mother is in heaven," said the child.

Which made Reprobus feel a little sorry for the way he had spoken. "Well, then, go home to your father," he said more kindly.

"He's in heaven too."

"So why do you want to cross this dangerous river?"

"I am here to have a ride from you," said the child with such a winning smile that Reprobus could not resist.

He picked the child up and waded into the current, which seemed swifter and deeper than usual that day. Also, the child was heavier than he looked.

"You're a heavy little fellow," said Reprobus.

"It is a good thing that you are strong," said the child.

Reprobus splashed on, but as the water grew deeper and heavier, the child grew heavier. It was strange and a bit frightening. Reprobus began to fear he might fall.

"Child," he cried, "why are you getting heavier?"

"So that you will know who it is you have chosen to serve. I am the Christ child, and I am heavy because I am burdened with the sins of the whole world. To serve me is to bear a great load, but if you have faith and hope, all will be well. Bear me up now, and the on the other side you will be freed from this terrible weight."

Strange to say, when Reprobus heard these words, faith and hope flowed into him, and they were stronger than the great river that flowed around his waist. He was able to bear the child up and across the flood, and sure enough when they came to the other side, the child became as light as the sun in spring. Joyful, Reprobus swung the child off his shoulders and set him down, and the child blessed him and disappeared, though not before telling him to plant his staff in the earth where it would take root and blossom for a sign. This happened, and people came for miles around to see the miracle and worship Christ. They also gave Reprobus a new name-- Christopher, which means Christbearer--and they didn't make any jokes.

Christopher he became, traveling to other places to tell his story and preach Christ. He converted multitudes. It was the happiest time of his life--much better than knocking people on the head for the great king or dining with the devil in dreary hell--and Christopher remained happy in spite of the fact that, like many saints, he suffered persecution and eventually martyrdom. All his sufferings he accepted steadfastly, borne up by the Christ child whom he had once borne, confident in his faith that at last he served the greatest king of the world.