



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Friday, December 24, 2021
Christmas Eve

Solemn Eucharist of the Nativity (Midnight Mass)
10:30pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*
on
Luke 2:1-20
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The Calvary and the Christmas Tree

There is a book, long out of print, that was formational in my sense of calling to be a priest back in 1979 when I was a young undergraduate. It was a collection of essays edited by Eric James titled 'Stewards of the Mysteries of God.' In it was a short piece by Bishop Richard Holloway when he was, then, Rector of Old St. Paul's, Edinburgh, in Scotland. It is an essay that I have regularly been drawn back to. In the essay, Holloway describes taking the Blessed Sacrament from his beautiful Anglo-Catholic Church to a frail, elderly lady who lived in a run-down apartment block. He describes the kitchen where she was always waiting for him, with a small card table and a clean white cloth, but the fact that the room was bare of any decoration save a calendar on the wall from relatives overseas and, on the small card table, a cheap white plastic frame containing a photograph of Blackpool Tower. Now, it is unlikely you will know of Blackpool Tower; more likely you will know of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, which Blackpool Tower emulates though on a much smaller scale. Unlike the Eiffel Tower, Blackpool Tower sits above a dance hall and an amusement park in a seaside town in the Northwest of England that is characterized by a sense of faded-glory. Holloway marvels at the seeming paradox of his weekly communion visits; he says,

"At first I was rather self-consciously moved by this strange juxtaposition. I served a beautiful church in which High Mass is celebrated with austere loveliness. In the sanctuary, dominated by a large golden reredos, nothing tasteless intrudes... So I was moved by that picture of Blackpool Tower and the condescension of Christ who came to lie beneath it. He did not belong there, of course. He belonged in the sanctuary, but of his great love he visited this mean dwelling and condescended to lie beneath this tasteless emblem of artificiality. Every week Christ came slumming with me. He left his golden throne and went visiting the poor..."

Those words take me at once to Paul's letter to the Philippians: *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."* (Philippians 2:5-7)

One of the hardest things to comprehend is what the incarnation truly means – in other words, what we celebrate at Christmas, particularly when the doctrine is masked by all the tinsel and baubles and the commercialism we see on Fifth Avenue. And yet, on and near Fifth Avenue, as our Ecumenical Social Worker John Sheehan has pointed out, there are hundreds of people who lack even the most rudiment of basic needs, and this Christmas a shocking 25,000 children will spend the night in a municipal homeless shelter. Such sobering facts remind us how scandalous the doctrine of the incarnation is by human standards, for on that first Christmas night, God chose to be homeless himself, and to be associated with

the poor. In sharp contrast, in human terms, we are taught that power and wealth, status and fame are everything. But more than that, is it not the case that it is instilled in each of us at a very early age that each of us has our place in the general scheme of things? How often have I felt out of place; how often less than adequate; how often silenced for fear of making a fool of myself. Monarchs belong in palaces with servants; Presidents in their cabinet rooms; Corporate bosses in their private jets; so, where else should God who is the source of all there is be? In heaven, of course, away from the squalor of the world; away from the squalor of the world, away from the squalor of *my* life and *my* mess.

But...*“Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”*

“Christ...belonged in the sanctuary, but of his great love he visited this mean dwelling and condescended to lie beneath this tasteless emblem of artificiality. Every week Christ came slumming with me. He left his golden throne and went visiting the poor...”

If you want another way of looking at it, you can see it hear next to the pulpit in the new Christmas Tree bought by a member of staff as a memorial gift for family members who died during the pandemic, for it is also a poignant reminder of the seeming paradox of what we are celebrating this night – the mystery of the incarnation. I have sat in church and pondered the juxtaposition of the 9/11 memorial and the Calvary next to this Christmas Tree. In some respects, like Holloway experienced, it seems incongruous but, on further reflection it can actually begin to help us understand a little more of the depth of meaning of the incarnation – the self-emptying of God into his creation. As I look at the relationship between this gaudy tree, that is not even real, with its LED lights illuminating the medieval image of the Lord on his cross, my eyes are drawn to the words of Queen Elizabeth II inscribed beneath the memorial – *“Grief is the price we pay for love.”* And as I look at this seemingly incongruous relationship, I am also reminded of a beautiful altarpiece by the German artist, Father Sieger Köder in the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows, Rosenberg, in Germany. The panels of the triptych move and there is, again, a juxtaposition of themes; for one panel - the Nativity - when moved, reveals another panel hidden behind it depicting the horror of a concentration camp during the Second World War and, next to it, a scene of the *Pieta*; Mary holding the lifeless body of Jesus at the foot of the cross. Was ever there such a poignant scene? The mother cradling her new-born, and the mother cradling the same body of her crucified son. Hidden behind the beauty of that Nativity scene lies the reality of pain, anguish, and death itself. With that almost scandalous knowledge of what is hidden, as you then gaze for a second time at the beautiful Nativity scene, it is not long before you begin to notice something else, also hidden – something is carved into the wooden manger: the letters, INRI, which thirty years later, would be placed above the Lord’s Cross.

No, the juxtaposition of the Calvary and the Christmas Tree is a good theologically orthodox reminder that Holy Week needs Christmas and Christmas needs Holy Week to tell the whole story of how God made himself, as it were, poor for our sakes in order that we might become rich.

And, as we think of that, how many of us are, in actual fact, poor this night? (I don’t mean in monetary terms). How many of you have come carrying your own burdens? How many of you, tomorrow, will have empty chairs at your dinner tables? And not just the families of the 800,000 who have died of COVID, but a vast multitude the world over who feel sad, weary, or downtrodden simply because they carry a burden, a memory, or a sadness. And, on this most holy night, those burdens, those memories, *that sadness*, we proclaim, is felt by God because of this holy birth. Have you ever wondered why we have this particular Gospel reading at Midnight Mass – the gospel of the angels and the shepherds? It is not simply because it is set at night time, but because it is a gospel filled with so much joy and hope. Yes, our God is *not* like earthly rulers, or monarchs, or presidents, or corporate bosses - distant, or aloof. Our God has come down among us in Jesus Christ to lift the weight of our burdens; to say to you and to me that we are not alone; that we are loved and cherished. And more than that, to say to you and to me – you have a cherished place in the great scheme of things because Jesus Christ has left that cherished place and humbled himself, and all for you and me. As

one of the great Anglican blessings of Christmas puts it, *“Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one things earthly and heavenly, fill you with peace and goodwill and make you partakers of the divine nature.”* Just think about that! God humbles himself to come among us so that we might take our rightful place alongside him in heaven!

As St. John Chrysostom said in his great Christmas Sermon, *“The Son of God, who is the God of all things, is born a Man in body. He permits himself to be placed in a crib, who holds the heavens in his hand. He is confined in a manger whom the world cannot contain; he is heard in the voice of a wailing infant, at whose voice in the hour of his passion the whole earth trembled.”*

Dear friends, do you feel that trembling this night? Not the distant rumble of the ‘E’ train beneath us, but the trembling of the very fabric of time and space because of God’s presence. He comes! He comes to us, once again, as he did in Bethlehem, the House of Bread – but now in a fragile piece of bread, made by human hands, in a few moments, on this altar.

He comes to you and to me, and he says, *“My child, how much I love thee.”*