

1st Sunday after Christmas - 2018

In Nomine+

“Did you have a nice Christmas?” How many of you have had that exact question asked of you in the past few days? I’d be willing to wager, pretty heavily, that everyone has been asked at least once, and many of us have been asked more times than we’ve bothered to count. This time of year, it seems to be a seasonal substitute for the more customary “How are you?” which we all know is not meant to be answered, only acknowledged with a “fine! And you?”, so that we can get on with whatever communication is necessitated by our encounter with one another.

I suspect, “How was your Christmas?,” is really meant to invite closure on what has become a hyper-busy, over scheduled, frantic and stressful period of time extending from Halloween to Christmas Day (or maybe even longer, if one is really susceptible to the aggressive marketing strategies of some retailers). It is also an invitation to return to a state of “normalcy,” whatever that maybe.

I do not observe this phenomenon in the city, probably because of where I live, but when I lived in smaller town settings, I used to see people on Christmas Day, putting out their forlorn, denuded trees, a few overlooked foil ice cycles waving helplessly in the December breezes, for trash pick-up the following day, along with bags of brightly colored wrapping paper and festive ribbons, some still attached to cartons and boxes that recently held the gifts, intended to surprise and delight.

For many years, now, I have found this practice both sad and alarming; sad, because it indicates a lack of appreciation for what I regard as the most important part of the annual Christmas celebration; and alarming, because it testifies to the diminishing power of the Christian gospel to mediate or even better, reduce the overwhelming dominance of the materialistic cult of the ubiquitous icon in the red suit. There is something about the secular hijacking of “the meaning of Christmas” that really gets to me, and I tend, for better or for worse, respond to it defiantly with disappointment and perhaps with more than a smidgen of arrogance.

“Did you have a nice Christmas?” “Well, so far, but it’s too early to tell since it’s only just begun!” “How was your Christmas?” “I don’t know. Ask me after Epiphany!” Both of these answers are real conversation stoppers, I promise you! My brother, who is a truly gentle soul, reminded me only this week that I had “educated him” several years ago, by explaining to him, apparently at some length, that Christmas begins on Christmas Day and lasts through all of the 11 succeeding days. Everything before that is Advent or even something more distantly related. “So I know better than to rush the season when you’re around,” He offered, with a shy smile. I felt just a little embarrassed, but also just a slight sense of satisfaction.

My point in all this is that Christmas really does have a meaning. It is about God becoming human! This celebration is about the revelation of one of the great and fundamental mysteries of the Christian faith, the hypostatic union of the divine Logos and a fully human being, born of a woman onto a single being who entered our world as one of us! Now, I don’t object to the stories of the angels and shepherds, or even the wise men bearing gifts, who are often blamed for starting the whole gift giving thing, but those are merely illustrative to the fundamental, amazing, cosmos-altering event that John, in our gospel this morning works so hard to articulate and make us realize and, more importantly, to embrace and internalize.

The Word became flesh and lived among us, is a remarkable reality-bending statement. What kind of God does that? Well not one who wishes to remain aloof and removed from a troubled and sinful world. What manner of divinity would be motivated toward such a generous act of humiliation, as the ancient fathers would have describe it? Certainly not one who was indifferent to the helplessness and hopelessness of a fallen race. What kind of holy love and concern extends itself to redeem and raise up an entire errant creation by personally entering that world to teach and save by example and self-sacrifice? Certainly not one seeking power, domination and aggrandizement. What can be in the mind and heart of someone who willingly takes on the transgressions of the guilty at the cost of his own life? Certainly not any being who places his own interests ahead of the needs of others or the rescue of those who are lost. What is the source and nature of a light so powerful that cannot be diminished, even in the darkest of abysses? Certainly not one of earthly or temporal origin. In short, who is this Christ? And what is he doing here? What does his coming into the world do for me? To me? How does it alter and amend me? What does my knowledge and acceptance of it require of me? Of others? What are the consequences, seen and unseen of this violation of natural law and order, this miracle of undeserved compassion and sumptuous outpouring of love?

These questions and many, many more form a cloud of inquiry that reveals the presence of a holy mystery. The definition of a mystery is a truth that cannot be known by human effort, but may be revealed only by God. We can search for answers, and come up with some that may serve us, more as working hypotheses than solutions, but absolute certainty will always allude us. Like the Holy Trinity, or Creation, or the Atonement, or the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, we will always know only in part and have to rely heavily on the gift of faith to bring us the confidence and assurance we long to have and feel that we desperately need. Promises of blessing and exaltation from the Prophet Isaiah and cerebral explanations of God's purpose from the pen of the Apostle Paul, along with many, many other scriptural citations and the accumulated experiences of the faithful may help to enlarge our understanding of this mystery, but in our heart of hearts, we know that there is much we will never know or comprehend, fully and completely. We also know that it is our challenge, our duty and our goal to try.

The contemplation and exploration of this incomprehensible and mysterious gift from on high, in my opinion, offers us plenty of really worthwhile spiritual work ready made for a compact, twelve-day commitment each year, and I see it as work that is a part of our calling as people who have taken on this name of Christian. I look forward to it. It's our time to celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord, in the way that leads us not further into the morass of this world, but into the ethereal heights of holy spaces which point us toward our anticipated final destination. It is there, and only there that the mystery, all mystery will be finally and perfectly resolved.

So, I say, let the others throw out the trees, take down the wreaths, send Santa, his reindeer and bag of goodies off for a rest, un-deck the halls. Christmas, the real Christmas is here, now, for us to meet, engage, enjoy, appreciate and ponder without distraction, rush or deadline. It truly is a most wonderful and rewarding time of year. Let's all make the most of it!

Merry Christmas!
Amen.