



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Friday, December 25, 2009
Christmas Day

Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00am

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Hebrews 1:1-12
&
Saint John 1:1-14

+

CHRISTMAS DAY 2009

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It is wonderful to see so many of you here on Christmas morning. We have had a church-full of people for our many Christmas services in the run-up to the actual day throughout December's Advent season. There has been Handel's *Messiah* on two nights; two services of five lessons and carols; a concert of Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* and John Rutter's *Dancing Day* by the Boys of the Choir; two services of the full, traditional Nine Lessons and Carols; a crèche service with lessons and carols; and climactically but not finally, last night's Midnight Mass and Solemn Eucharist of the Nativity.

All of these services, including the Britten/Rutter concert by the Boys, are available over our webcast. And, you may obtain *Messiah* (the Mozart orchestration) on a recording. Dr. Scott, Mistert Teardo and Kwan, Men and Boys, this is an awe-inspiring offering to the honor and glory of our incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. I applaud you.

Christmas morning, although not fraught so much with the expectation, excitement and anxiety of anticipation, has its own, more reflective, gift to offer. What the Church would have us think of this morning shines out in the two New Testament readings – the beginnings of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Gospel according to Saint John. Both those messages say the same thing; namely, that the Baby whose birth we are celebrating is not only the consummate, exemplary, all-inclusive and sinless Son of Man, the One True Human Being; he is at the same time the divine Son of God, co-equal and co-eternal with his Father and the Holy Spirit, made flesh and dwelling among us. He is God, disclosing himself in our nature, addressing us in terms we can grasp, saying and doing things intended to lead us back into fellowship with him and – in him – with one another.

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. But many do not receive his coming, or dismiss it, or simply do not care to know. He was in the world, and the world was made by him; yet the world knew him not. He came to his own; and his own received him not. How then is he received? Reception is a gift, like love itself. As many as receive

him, who believe in his name, to them he gives power to become the children of God – children born not by the will and exertion of flesh and blood, nor by human striving, but by the grace of God. The grace of God, God’s love and loveliness, descends like the morning dew. It is a gift from above.

This past month I had cause to visit two widows. Both are quite elderly and infirm, yet in full possession of their keen wits, elegant and beautiful in that way that old age can refine. Both have adequate means to have housekeeper-companions, both are fortunate in this world’s terms. Both have lived full and interesting lives which were bound up in their love for their husbands and the remarkable careers those men had. Both feel their infirmities; both are clear-eyed and practical about the prospects of life before them. Yet there is what the Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard would call an “infinite qualitative difference.” One is happy, even though she is homebound. The other is sad and fairly lost.

The latter widow does not as of now know the life of the Church; I sense also she does not understand the grace of God – though she has known many wonderful subordinate graces. Her loneliness is palpable, heavy. How to introduce her to the Lord? – I wonder to myself. There is still time. I pray: Heaviness may endure for a night; let joy come in the morning. There is still time, including time to visit her again. Even so, come, Lord; come into her heart and help her, please.

The one who, beneath all her infirmities, is happy announces cheerfully when I arrive that she has lived long enough! Just look at me, Andy, she says. Her eyesight is failing. She is hard of hearing and lame. It’s time for me to go, she says, meaning 90-something years is more than enough for her. Well, God’s not ready for you quite yet, I reply. We have Communion together, just she and I. She prays and sighs with relief; we have a few laughs, tell some stories – she’s really good at stories. She remembers things from the days of our eighth Rector Dr. Stires who built this great church; funny things. We laugh and I kiss her goodbye on the cheek, wishing her Merry Christmas. I return to Saint Thomas, feeling buoyed up. She has ministered to me as much as I have to her. Even in her condition, she’s still on duty for her Lord, even though she often doesn’t recognize it. Thanks be to God.

The difference, the infinite qualitative difference, between these two splendid ladies, these two widows, gets at what the Evangelist is saying in today’s Gospel. May we all receive that gift from heaven, the gift which, even in the midst of the pains and infirmities of old, makes for happiness and peace which passes human understanding.

Alleluia. Unto us a Child is born. O come, let us adore him. Alleluia.