



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, December 24, 2019**  
*Christmas Eve*

*Solemn Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 p.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*  
*on*  
Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; and Luke 2:1-20  
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### **No room.**

A few weeks ago, my wife and I were invited to a parishioner's home for dinner. They live in Jamaica (that is, Jamaica - Queens, though I wouldn't have minded a trip to Montego Bay!). It took quite a while to get there and I marveled that, in their late 80's they still made the journey here to Saint Thomas Church faithfully and, often, twice a week. Although they are strictly speaking "seniors", they are extraordinary "night owls" (their children would say "party animals") having led very full and devoted lives in the medical profession here, in London, and in West Africa. Around midnight, my wife and I said that we really ought to go and I had a look at my Uber app. I was horrified by what we would be charged if we took a car back to Manhattan at that time of night so I elected that we take the subway. After all, the F train had dropped us off almost at their door.

We walked through the quiet streets – it was icy cold with a chill wind - and down the subway station steps. At which point, my wife turned to me and said in an equally chilling way, "*Would you really be doing this, at this time of night, if you were on your own?*" By which stage, it was too late and we were already on the platform and I realized that the station was deserted. It's amazing how insecure you can feel in a subway station in the early hours of the morning, especially when it is miles away from home. Suddenly I remembered the words of my assistant as I had left that day, "*Remember, Father Turner, make sure you get a car home.*" Now my mind began to play tricks and I had flashbacks to scenes from movies set in deserted subway stations late at night – from the Matrix to Die Hard with a Vengeance!

We were at the end of the line but, mercifully, a train came quite quickly and, as we moved to the carriage door, suddenly, there appeared as if out of nowhere, a number of people from the shadows. We chose a carriage that looked empty but, on entering and sitting down realized that there were six other people already in it. Although it was the end of the line, they did not get up to leave. They were asleep, with bags around them, and they continued to lie on the benches - which explained why we could not see them from the station platform.

I marveled on that journey back to our warm apartment in Manhattan. How many times would these unfortunate people travel the F-train track that night? I turned to my wife and said, *“This is where they will live tonight. We have been in Ted and Yolande’s apartment and enjoyed Fondue, but now we are sharing someone else’s home.”*

The number of homeless on the streets of New York is shocking. This Christmas Eve, as I go home to my warm apartment, over 22,000 children will be sleeping in municipal shelters. Our Angel Tree drive, as most years, provided gifts and presents for children in one particular shelter who have been traumatized by domestic violence. Just as here, back in Britain, where I come from, there are many reasons why people are homeless or who are refugees. Many have mental health issues or have suffered trauma – a disproportionate number are veterans who have served their country in the armed forces.

At this stage in the sermon, the warm glow of Christmas might be starting to fade just a little, and you might be wondering why on earth the priest is making you feel uncomfortable. Surely this has nothing to do with why we are here this evening? Surely this has nothing to do with the Christmas story? As someone said to me as they left the Nine Lessons and Carols this afternoon – some of those carols were *really dark!*

Of course, I don’t want you to leave here uncomfortable. I want you to leave here filled with joy and peace. But I want to suggest that the plight of our homeless has quite a lot to do with the Christmas story and, paradoxically, their plight might help us understand the story of Bethlehem and bring us even greater joy.

What seems to be the greatest throw-away line in Luke’s Gospel is, in actual fact, a reminder of the immensity of God’s love for you and for me, and how far our God will go to draw all humanity back to himself. Sandwiched between the description of the great Census of the Roman Empire, the fraught journey to Bethlehem all the way from Nazareth in the North, the birth of Jesus and then the amazing sight of the angels visiting the shepherds comes this little sentence; *“because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

Mary brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; **because there was no room for them in the inn.**

Jesus was born homeless with not even a municipal shelter to keep him warm. He had no warm bed, instead, he was placed in an animal’s feeding trough. His first visitors were not family but shepherds - commoners who were looked down upon by high society.

**Because there was no room for them in the inn.**

Paul, writing to the Philippians says this, *“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)

This *self-emptying* of God is the greatest cause of the angels’ joy. Our God made himself small in the womb of Mary so that *we* could be made great again. Jesus came to bring us home by becoming homeless himself. Thus, the story of those six poor unfortunates that shared a journey with me on

the F train three weeks ago is very much aligned with the Christmas story. Or, perhaps thinking of Paul's description of Christ's self-emptying, God aligns himself with those who have nothing because, in Bethlehem, God experienced what it is like to have absolutely nothing in order to give us everything.

And the gift that Christ brings is the knowledge that we are loved and cherished, no matter what we think of ourselves, and certainly in spite of what other people think of us. Continuing that letter to the Philippians, Paul explains how far Jesus will go in emptying himself: "*And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*"

What can we give in return, my friends, for such love poured out for you and for me?

What gift do you have for Jesus this night? What gift can even approach his self-offering and all-encompassing and compassionate love? What gift can you give him that would make the angels sing again this night?

A simple carol says it all:

*What can I give him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a Shepherd  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man  
I would do my part,  
Yet what I can I give him  
Give my heart.*

My dear friends, happy Christmas!