



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

Sunday, December 25, 2019
Christmas Day

Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Isaiah 52:7-10, Hebrews 1:1-12, and John 1:1-14
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To be real, you must be alive.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit?"

Now that I am a grandfather, and my grandson is three, stories that I used to tell my own children are making a comeback. In a few days, I will see them again and it's time to tell Edward, who is now three years old, the story of the Velveteen Rabbit.

Edward is still in that wonderful stage of life where it is still okay for reality and fantasy to blur their boundaries. A few days ago, he told me that he had seen Santa. actually, he has been to see three Santas this December, so I asked him about the experience. He screwed up his face and put on the deepest voice that a three-year old can muster and said, "*Gan-dad, Santa said, 'and have you been good this year little boy?' and I said, 'you know I have Santa!*'"

Of course, it will not be long before the penny drops or, worse, some mean scrooge-like person will delight in telling him that Santa is not real and Rudolph has not nibbled the carrot, and that it's his dad that eats the mince pie and the sips the glass of sherry left by the fireplace just as his mother did, and her mother before, and her mother before that. (Actually, Edward is quite savvy – he knows Santa prefers a gin and tonic these days!).

The great thing about telling a story is that it connects with your own imagination. Unlike a story presented on the cinema or the television screen, so much of the story is left to our own imagining – how the characters look, how they speak, how they react to their surroundings. *Re-telling* the story is, sometimes, as important as the story itself and something that St. Ignatius of Loyola encouraged in his spiritual exercises – to go deeper and deeper into the story and to imagine your place within that story.

One of the most widespread of the Ignatian Spiritual exercises is called the *Examen* and Jesuits try to use it daily. There are variations but, effectively, there are 5 simple steps – it begins with a deliberate choice to

become aware of God's presence and to thank him for his love and ends with a specific decision to cooperate with God's plan. But it is the middle or third step that is the most important: Review the day now past, thinking about what has happened and, more importantly, how you were feeling at those moments of the day. Because it is done deliberately in prayer, that reflection leads quite naturally to a period of reflection on where God was in each moment and whether we were drawing closer to him or away from him.

The Jesuit James Martin, in his book, 'The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything,' writes this: *"Think of it as a movie playing in your head. Push the play button and run through your day, from start to finish, from your rising in the morning to preparing to go to bed at night. Notice what made you happy, what made you stressed, what confused you, what helped you be more loving. Recall everything: sights, sounds, feelings, tastes, textures, conversations. Thoughts, words, and deeds, as Ignatius says. Each moment offers a window to where God has been in your day."*

Isn't that beautiful! **Each moment offers a window to where God has been in your day.**

And how significant that second part of the book's title is: "A Spirituality for **Real Life.**"

My friends, as adults, it is so easy to live our lives as if everything needed to be in neat little boxes, compartments, or folders to file things away. We think we know about fantasies and yet we crave them and want to live in them. We are faced with the realities of life – of choices to be made and difficult things to encounter - and we try to avoid them. We even give God his own box or compartment, or folder too, just in case those two worlds collide.

However, my grandson Edward is still able to marvel at a man pretending to be Santa in an ill-fitting suit and polyester beard and think about how much his mummy and daddy and sister love him and cherish him. He is learning the very natural tools of how to reflect on God's presence in his life as he grows older. This is a very natural thing to do. Why? Because God already knows our stories and even our fantasies because he has entered into that story and changed everything, including what we might see as a mediocre story, by his presence.

God physically enters into our own story in order that our story might be redeemed in his. As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, *"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."*

This is no myth. It is salvation history – our story caught up in God's story. Neither is it mere words because at the heart of our Gospel reading today we hear the startling and shocking news: *"And the Word became flesh and lived among us."* The story has become one with us – part of us – incarnate in our midst.

And that means that God experienced all that is to be human – all the love, and the devotion, and the wonder associated with human life. It also means that God also experienced rejection, cruelty, and abuse:

"Does it hurt?" said the Rabbit. *"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."*

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"You become. It takes a long time" said the Skin Horse. "Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not"

My friends, the story of Christmas is the story of God pouring out his love into creation and drawing us back to himself. It is no fairytale (for it is bound up in flesh and blood) and is the means that allows us to becoming fully alive – fully human; for once, accepting of who I am with all my flaws and faults and yet rejoicing that I am **real** because God wants it that way.

In an interview, Archbishop Rowan Williams once said this:

“It’s possible for people to live with about 5-10% of their humanity really engaged...and that’s really not good enough – they deserve to have the fullness of their humanity engaged.”

In reflecting in that same Ignatian way, Rowan encouraged his listeners to be more attentive and more aware of their surroundings. He concluded, *“Your humanity is more interesting and more alive than you could ever imagine.”*

Your humanity is more interesting and more alive than you could ever imagine.

And this mass of Christmas Day is proof of that. Paul, writing to the Ephesians says, *“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”* (Ephesians 2:4-5)

My friends, be attentive this day, and give thanks that God has made you fully alive and loves you in Jesus Christ our Lord. Happy Christmas!