

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Saturday, December 24, 2022
Christmas Eve

Procession and Solemn Eucharist of the Nativity
10:30 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Luke 2:1-20
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The Humility and Love of God

I woke up this morning to hear news of the shelling of the city of Kherson in Ukraine. People of that beleaguered city had been shopping at the market, presumably getting ready to celebrate Christmas. Families including children were killed in a senseless attack on a civilian target. Meanwhile, many miles away in Bethlehem, the place of Christ's birth, the first Christmas procession in three years was taking place amid a backdrop of heightened tension between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority. Just after Easter, this year, a group of pilgrims from our parish went to the Holy Land and, of course, we visited Bethlehem. We went to the what is one of the oldest churches in the world – the Church of the Nativity. What struck us more than that ancient 5th century church was the huge and ugly wall that has been built around the city, so there is no room for growth; the checkpoint that we had to pass through; and the graffiti on the wall which, surprisingly, was hopeful messages of peace and goodwill – the message of the angels that we heard in tonight's gospel. How poignant.

The wall, itself, has become not just a symbol of mistrust and fear that can exist between peoples, but a symbol of the fall itself – of the enmity between humanity and God that we heard as the first lesson in each of our carol services this year.

In the first book of the bible, the book of Genesis, in the story of that first fall from grace, we see this idea of separation, of which the wall around Bethlehem represents, described so vividly when God walked in the Garden of Eden at the cool of the day, and Adam and Eve hid from him. In what is probably the first game of hide and seek, it is God, the Creator, who asked the question "*Where art thou?*" And from their hiding place we hear the most pitiful words of Adam, "*I heard thy voice in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.*" Perhaps Adam speaks for many of us who are also afraid of God and meeting him face to face. Our natural inclination is to hide; to shut ourselves away from him for fear that he might see truly who we are.

Saint Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic of 16th century, had a spiritual exercise that she encouraged the members of her community, and those who sought spiritual direction, to practice. It is a very simple exercise, similar to the Ignatian spiritual exercises, because it does not require months of studying, any understanding of dogma, or any complicated formulae. Instead, it simply relies on one's imagination. In her exercise, St. Teresa said that you should imagine Jesus standing before you and looking at you. But looking at you in a particular way, and perhaps not the way that you might expect. Teresa said, "*you must notice him looking at you lovingly and humbly.*"

Jesus looking at you lovingly and humbly.

So often, we are brought up to fear God; but not in the way that the Bible describes, in that sense of the awe and wonder and mystery of God that brings us to our knees in worship. Rather, many of us have been brought up to be *afraid* of God, afraid of him seeing who we really are, or what we have become, or worse, what we have failed to become measure by the expectations of others.

Because of the fall from Grace, humanity became afraid of God and lost. Because of his love for us, God, instead, came close to us and humbled himself out of love for us.

In medieval times, there was a great love of play on words, and they are portray the paradox of the incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas. I love some of those ancient hymns of the church and the medieval carols that express this in seemingly absurd ways, and yet are brimming with truth about the doctrine of the incarnation.

*"There is no rose of such virtue
As is the rose that bare Jesu;
For in this rose contained was
Heaven and earth in little space;"*¹

*"Hark, hark, the wise eternal Word,
like a weak infant cries!
In form of servant is the Lord,
And God in cradle lies."*²

And from the 5th century,
*"He shrank not from the oxen's stall,
he lay within the manger-bed,
and he whose bounty feedeth all,
at Mary's breast himself was fed."*³

Yes, the doctrine of the incarnation (what we celebrate at Christmas) is filled with irony, and poignancy, and ultimately with paradox. How is it that we human beings, who have marred God's creation through sin, through war and violence, through pollution and environmental disaster; who have marred the image of God in each one of us because of the abuse of power, systemic racism, inequality, and prejudice, should deserve a second chance? But that, my friends, is at the heart of the Christmas story. When everything seemed so bleak and twisted and broken, God broke into our world and charged it by his very presence in the person of Jesus Christ.

And that takes us back to St. Teresa. St. Teresa said that you should imagine Jesus standing before you and looking at you, and you must notice him looking at you *lovingly* and *humbly*.

God humbled himself in Jesus because he loves us that much; Loves the people of Kherson that much; love the people of Moscow that much; loves the Jew and loves the Palestinian Christian that much; loves **you and me** that much. The dis-ease of fear is broken down because of the love of Jesus. And that gives us hope. Hope when we are afraid; hope, when afraid of what the doctor or surgeon say; hope, when afraid when things are going badly wrong at work; hope, when afraid because we may lose our paid employment; hope, when afraid because a of a relationship that is strained; hope, when afraid to turn on the television and see, yet again, scenes of war, and prejudice, and natural disaster; hope, when afraid to look into the eyes of the homeless man on the street, because it could one day turn out to be me.

In Jesus, God has taught us a new way of being human – through the way of humility and love.

In Bethlehem, when you approach the Church of the Holy Nativity, there is a surprising discovery. Unlike St. Peter's Rome, or the great Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela; unlike Buckingham Palace or the Capitol Building; unlike even Yankee Stadium; there is no grand entrance, and no easy way in. A small archway has been filled in and the doorway is less than 5 feet in height. Significantly, it is called the Door of Humility and in order to enter the great Church of the Holy Nativity, one must stoop low to pass through. In so doing, we use our bodies to remind ourselves that humility is not something demanded by God, but a way of life that can lead to a life charged with God's grace.

St. Teresa said that you must notice Jesus looking at you lovingly and humbly. Yes, my friends, Jesus is looking at you now, lovingly and humbly. His way is not the way of the world, for his way is the way of love and humility. That is why Christmas is a season of hope; because the antidote to the violence, degradation, and destruction caused by humanity is not something even more powerful, but rather, a relationship with the one who stooped to wash his disciples' feet, taking the form of a slave.

'You must notice him looking at you lovingly and humbly.' Dear friends, as a new year approaches, let us open up the secrets of our hearts to him who is ultimate love revealed in humble service.

Some words of Fr. Andrew, 11th Rector:

"God has the habit of visiting us in his socks – without shoes, so to speak. He never gives us time to put our faces right to greet him, or smooth our hair, or hide our untidinesses under the sofa cushion. There never is the best time for us to meet him, and he is always different from the way we picture him to be.

*In a line waiting for food,
not at an appearance for an Oscar award evening.
Among the dispossessed and fearful,
not making a triumphant arrival in a tuxedo."* ⁴

¹. English Traditional Carol c. 1420

². Thomas Pestel 1584-1659

³. Caelius Sedulius, c. 450

⁴. Sermon preached at Saint Thomas at Midnight Mass