

*Christmas Homilies at Christ Church,
Windsor, Nova Scotia
2016*

*Christmas Eve
Christmas Morn
St. Stephen the Martyr
St. John the Evangelist
The Holy Innocents
Octave Day of Christmas
(Jan 1st, 2017)*

(Fr. David Curry)

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”

She was an old woman, weary and worn, burdened with the cares and worries of life. She paused for a moment before a Crèche scene in the park of a big city. It was a time when such things were more common and were yet to be regarded as politically incorrect. She put her bags down and looked upon that quiet scene in the midst of the city’s bustle. I watched as she slowly crossed herself before picking up her bags and shuffling on. A Christmas blessing, I thought.

Christmas seems sometimes just too much. Perhaps some of you know what I mean. Kathy and Scotty Cameron have a pillow inscribed with the letters OCD meaning Obsessive Christmas Disorder! All the hustle and bustle, all the frantic press and bother, all the manic shopping and travel, all the tinsel and wrap; all too much. Not to mention the great plethora of images, the sights and sounds that surround this thing we call Christmas. Not to mention the sad array of images of violence and destruction, of war and sorrow that equally confront us and which stand in such glaring contrast to the claims of peace and prosperity, goodwill and charity. All too much, it seems. No time to stop and think.

Such a rich fullness of images. Are we simply to pick and choose whatever suits us or whatever happens to come to the surface of our hearts and minds? Are we like Dylan Thomas in his celebrated poem *“A Child’s Christmas in Wales”* simply to plunge our hands *“into that wool-white bell-tongued ball of holidays resting at the rim of the carol-singing sea”* and see what comes out? What comes out is *“Mrs. Prothero and the firemen”* attending a kitchen fire on Christmas day, a memorable event, no doubt, but it is the question which Jim’s aunt raises, Miss Prothero, who *“said the right thing, always”* which frames the narrative. *“Would you like anything to read?”* she asks.

Christmas Eve is about something read. *“How do you read?”* Jesus asks a questioning lawyer, meaning how do you read the Law, the Torah? He draws out of him what is known as *The Summary of the Law*, the ethical and spiritual teaching which is at once common to Judaism and Christianity, to Islam and to Greek philosophy and which connects to the teachings of the great religions of the world. The love of God and the love of humanity are somehow inescapably bound together. The lawyer’s answer, itself a collation of passages from *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus*, two of most your favourite books, I am sure, leads to another question by the lawyer, *“and who is my neighbour?”* Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is, we might say, part of the *Torah of Jesus*. Torah properly means instruction or guidance, an instruction and a guide for life. How you read is also about what you read. It leads to how we live. As we read so we do, as it were. In the mystery of Christmas, God becomes neighbour.

Yet, it must come as a kind of shock and surprise to hear what we read tonight at Christmas Eve. While our songs and carols tell the familiar story of a child born in a manger, of angels and shepherds, of sheep and cows and lowly asses, of Mary and Joseph, of no room in the inn at Bethlehem, and looming in the background the ominous presence of powers political and economic, of taxation and enumeration, the

readings of Christmas Eve concentrate our attention on God as Word and Son and Light. Powerful theological ideas are set before us. They go to the heart of the matter, to the essence of Christmas.

It is all about the *divinum mysterium*, the mystery of God and the greater mystery of God with us in the humanity of Jesus Christ. This redeems all the rich fullness of Christmas, makes holy of what seems to be too much by gathering everything into *the infinite greatness of God*, a greatness which none of our Christmas busyness can possibly comprehend. Christmas in its truth speaks to the darkness of our finite world, confronts us with the myriad of partial truths and images that belong to our finite and limited grasp of reality. Christmas challenges the reductive certainties of the natural sciences in reducing the world to the quantum uncertainties of random contingent existence. It challenges the reductive claims of the social sciences in reducing everything to mere social constructs of our devising as if everything, as Terry Eagleton puts it "*is cultural, including the Andes and the aorta*" which is really, he suggests, "*a piece of self-flattery on the part of some in the humanities*". It challenges the reductive ideologies of the global world of neo-liberalism which has benefited the few at the expense of so many, destroying in its unfettered wake the institutions that make life meaningful, what Edmund Burke called "*the little platoons*". One has only to consider our Maritime world. It challenges, too, the view that Christmas is really about family, or children, or the economy. It is none of those things in themselves but only through these great words.

The point about these rich and powerful Christmas words is that they engage us and our world. They do so by virtue of the infinite greatness of God. "*He therefore that would be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity*", the great catholic *Creed of St. Athanasius* avers before going on to proclaim the essential aspects of the Incarnation in the creedal story of Christ. The Trinity? Yes. Nothing less than the mystery of God himself, as it were. Think the Trinity in this way? Yes. What is this way? The way of negation and affirmation. For that is the check and the counter as well as the redemption and the truth of our own finite thinking. God is at once no-thing and yet the principle of everything each in their own individual integrity. So God is not to be collapsed and confused with the things of creation in their finitude; at the same time, God is the basis and foundation for the being of each and everything in its truth.

To think God is the beginning of the Christmas mystery. "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God*". This is great spiritual and intellectual truth which is the common ground of many of the great religious and philosophical traditions of the world. As an anonymous medieval carol puts it, "*that which the Jews and the Greeks did divine/ Is come in the fullness of Jesus to shine.*" Such is the infinite light of the greatness of God. This is the great reality that gives meaning and purpose to all of the rich fullness of our Christmases.

The great wonder and miracle of Christmas is the wonder and miracle of God with us. It is the burden and task of the Church on this most holy night to proclaim this great wonder and mystery. The task is to open us out to Love Incarnate that alone can change our hearts and minds and redeem all the confusions and chaotic kaleidoscope of images

that surround and bombard us. The love of God engages us in the darkness of our fears and uncertainties to recall us to the truth of our being in him.

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”, literally ‘*tented among us*’, lest we might suppose that God has been taken captive more permanently to our devises and desires. *“Without forsaking what he was”,* God, *“he became what he was not”,* man. And for what end? That we might discover the true worth and meaning of our humanity. It is found in God, in our being with God because of God being with us. *“No one”,* John goes on to say in the Prologue of his Gospel, *“has ever seen God”*. God cannot be grasped empirically, but *“the only-begotten Son of the Father, he has made him known”,* literally ‘*exegeted him*’. This is the point. God reveals himself to us as *“infinite power, wisdom and goodness”* (Art. 1, *Articles of Religion*, BCP, p. 699) in the most paradoxical and yet wondrous way imaginable, in the Word made flesh, God with us, Emmanuel. We see but *“through a glass darkly”,* to be sure, yet we see for we behold what we have been given to see. It is what we read and how we read that makes all the difference. Here is the redemption of all our hearts and minds, the redemption of our humanity. It is found in the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. Here is the love which redeems our loves if we like that old lady pause and behold this holy scene. Only so can it speak to our hearts.

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”

Fr. David Curry
Christmas Eve, 2016

*“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour,
who is Christ the Lord”*

We meet in the contemplative wonder of Christmas morn after all the excitement of Christmas Eve. *“And so it was, that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son”*. He is *“the only-begotten of the Father full of grace and truth”* as we heard last night from the heights of heaven, as it were. We come to Bethlehem. Why? What does it signify?

We contemplate the great wonder of the unity of God and Man and the whole of the created order. There are the three great masses of Christmas: first, the proclamation and celebration of the eternal Sonship of the child Christ which we heard last night; second, the story of his actual birth made known in the songs of the Angels in the gospel this morning; and, then, later, the Christmas of the Shepherds to whom this angelic news from heavenly heights is proclaimed and made known. The three masses of Christmas present to us something of the fullness of this wonder and delight. Bethlehem is paradise restored, to be sure, but Bethlehem is something more. It inaugurates a new vision and a new life, the new vision and the new life of what has been made known to us, *God with us* and *God for us*. *“Unto you”*, the Angels say to the Shepherds and to us, *“unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord”*.

We are in the company of the Shepherds, it seems; only so, it seems, can we be in the company of the Angels; and even more, unless we are in the company of Angels and Shepherds, we shall not be with the holy Child who comes to us. The Angels proclaim something great and wondrous *for us*. Their words are strong words of proclamation that point to a wonder and mystery. They say it is *for us*. And for them? Only through us it seems, for in what they proclaim and make known we see the unity of the whole of creation with its Creator. The Angels, too, are part of that order. They do simply what belongs to their office and being, to their ministry, as it were. They are the messengers, the audible and visible thoughts of God made known to us.

“Fear not”, the Angel says, *“for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy”*. It is the office of Angels to bring the word, the Word of God to us. Here is the greater wonder, the wonder of that Word being *with us* in the intimacy of the birth of Christ, the intimacy and wonder of *the Word made flesh*. That community between God and Man signaled in the uniqueness of Christ reveals a wider community, the community of the whole created order at one with God, the Creator. An Angel brings good tidings of great joy to the Shepherds and so to us, but then, *“suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host”*, a host of Angels and the company of redeemed humanity.

Heaven and earth are suddenly one, joined in the simplicity and the lowliness of Bethlehem, *“though thou art least among the tribes of Judah”*, as Micah the prophet says; *“though thou art not the least among the princes of Judah”*, as Matthew the evangelist says; at once the least and the greatest of cities and places. See, there is even a union of

opposites, a resolution of the apparent contradictions between prophet and evangelist in the mystery of Bethlehem!

There is, perhaps, no greater and more symbolic representation of the yearnings of human hearts, "*the desire of the nations*", as it were, than what Bethlehem reveals. Here is the truth of every environmental concern, the unity of man with the order of nature, at one with beast and animal. Here is the vision of every social and political concern, the unity of man with man, of man and woman, of adult and child, of rich and poor, of shepherds and kings. Here "*the hopes and fears of all the years*" are made visible in the simple scene of Bethlehem. The "*things into which Angels have longed to look*" are made known to us, the very heights of heaven for philosopher and peasant alike to think and sing.

To sing. What we have been given to see on the strength of Angel's news we are given to sing with Angels' words. This "*heavenly host*", this vision of our humanity redeemed and sanctified, at one with God and his Angels, teach the Shepherds to sing. The Shepherds are the choir of the earth singing the songs of heaven. The unity of Bethlehem issues forth in chorus and music, in hymn and song. It becomes the great song of the liturgy, the *Gloria Dei*. It is the song which the Angels teach the Shepherds and they, in turn, teach us to sing.

"*Good tidings of great joy*" have been conveyed to us and what can we do but sing with the Shepherds and the Angels? And what we sing is more than mere words. They are words which must become our lives, our living what we sing, "*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will towards men*".

In the quiet wonder of Christmas morn we come like the Shepherds at an Angel's bidding to worship and adore. What we have been given to see, we are bidden to sing. Our worship is our life. For what we sing that we must also be, *the Word made flesh* taking flesh in us by the tenor of our lives. And all because of what we have seen and heard, all because of the Angel's word and message.

*"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour,
who is Christ the Lord"*

*Fr. David Curry
Christmas Morn, 2016 (re'05)*

“Lord, lay not this sin to their charge”

The words of the kneeling Stephen as he dies echo Christ's first word on the Cross, *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”* It is no accident that the first of the holy days of Christmas is *The Feast of St. Stephen*. It signifies two things that are of the greatest importance. The first is that without the Cross there is no manger. The second is that Christ's holy nativity inaugurates the mission of the Church. We are to follow in the steps of Christ. He is, as one of the Eastertide collects puts it, *“both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life”* (Easter 2). *The Feast of Stephen the Martyr* reveals the real depth and meaning of Christmas.

It is about sacrifice and about a new orientation to life, a living for others in the spirit of forgiveness. Stephen is the proto-martyr, the first witness of Christ in the form of the giving of his life. In a way, he marks the beginning of a significant tradition, the tradition of the saints. What is that about? Simply the living reality of Christ in the body of his Church and in the lives and actions of his members.

Christmas celebrates the mystery of God with us. Part of its radical meaning is that Christ lives in us. His Incarnation marks his being with us but for a purpose. It is redemption. *“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given”*, to be sure, but born and given for what? To suffer and to die for us. Why? To show us the true life which God seeks for us – life with God. To show us that sin is the negative feature of our humanity and not its real and radical truth which is found in our being with God. Sacrifice, meaning the giving over of ourselves to the one who has given himself fully for us, becomes the true measure and meaning of our lives. It is *‘another who lives in us’*, the other who is Christ Jesus the Lord. Herein lies the importance of the Feast of Stephen.

It highlights the very form of our celebration of Christ's nativity. We celebrate mass, *Christ's mass*, to be specific, however much that word has been part of the controversies between some Protestants and some Catholics. We celebrate Christmas with the vivid reminder that the babe of Bethlehem is the Christ of Calvary who *“on the night in which he was betrayed”* provides himself for us, body broken and blood outpoured in bread and wine. *“Our Passover is sacrificed for us”*. His holy birth signals his passion and death without which he cannot live in us and we in him. As the poet/preacher John Donne notes, *“his Christmas Day and his Good Friday are but the evening and the morning of one and the same day”*. They have no meaning apart from one another. *“Christ and His cross were never parted, but that all His life long was a continuous cross”*, as Lancelot Andrewes observes. *“Christ was born for this”*, as one of the carols of the season proclaims. And for us, it means following in our *“master's footsteps”* as the carol Good King Wenceslaus tells us.

The martyrdom of Stephen recalls us to the holy purpose and deeper meaning of Christmas. It means sacrifice and service modelled upon the life of Christ. The insight of Stephen provides the model; as with Christ so with us.

The overarching note is that of forgiveness. This is what John the Baptist has told us too. *"Behold"*, he says, *"the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world"*. That realization changes everything. It transcends the animosities and divisions of our hearts and souls. It changes how we view and deal with a torn and tortured world. It signals the power of forgiveness.

Stephen has grasped the inner logic and meaning of the Christian Faith. It is about redemptive suffering but only through the power and grace of divine forgiveness. His last words echo the last and first word of Christ from the Cross. *"Lord Jesus"*, he says, *"receive my spirit"* even as Jesus in the last word of the Cross prays, *"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit"*. Christ's first word of forgiveness is echoed in the last word of Stephen's martyrdom, *"Lord,"* he says, *"lay not this sin to their charge."* In the mercies of Christ's holy birth there is more to our humanity than just the seemingly unending spectacle of destruction and disarray.

There is our being with the one who comes to be with us, the one who is born and given for us that his life may live in us. It means forgiveness.

"Lord, lay not this sin to their charge"

Fr. David Curry
The Feast of St. Stephen, 2016

“Even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written”

“Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh,” Ecclesiastes observes, an observation, no doubt, with which many a student would concur. John, too, at the very end of the last chapter of his Gospel reflects on the writing of books; somehow the reality and full meaning of Christ would comprise more books than what the world could contain. There is always something more and more to the meaning of Christ as Word.

The Word proclaimed *“at sundry times and in diverse manners ... unto the fathers by the prophets”*, Hebrews reminds us, *“hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.”* That Word and Son is the Word made flesh, as John reminds us in his powerful *Prologue* read as the great Gospel of Christmas Eve. There is a focus on Word; Word proclaimed, Word made flesh, but also the Word as written *“even if the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.”*

The Feast of John the Evangelist belongs to our Christmas observances. His Epistles and his Gospel provide the strongest testimony to the idea and reality of the Incarnation, the greatest insight into the mystery of God with us in the humanity of Jesus Christ. *“That which was from the beginning,”* he says, echoing at once the opening words of his *Prologue* but also the opening words of *Genesis*, *“which we have heard,”* he says, *“which we have seen with our eyes,”* he says, *“which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of life,”* he says, that is what *“declare we unto you.”* And to what end? *“That ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”* It is a remarkably concise and stirring theological testament to the Incarnation and the Trinity, to the deeper mystery of Christmas.

We can only have access to this understanding by way of the Word written. True, the Gospel passage refers to the *“many other things which Jesus did”* that have not been written, things which go beyond the scope of books that the world could contain. Many other things done *and said*, too, we may reasonably infer, allowing room for the various oral traditions alluded to in the New Testament, perhaps. But the deeper point is that Jesus as Word cannot be contained either by books or by the world or by us at the same time as it is only through the Word proclaimed, Incarnate, and written that we can know these things. *“These things write we unto you,”* John says to us directly in his *First Epistle*, *“that your joy may be full,”* concluding with the coda *“that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”* Light and Son conveyed through the majesty of the divine Word proclaimed, Incarnate and written.

We can only have access to the mystery of God with us through the mediation of the Word. John in his writings is the Evangelist of the Word *par excellence* who opens us out to the great wonder of the Incarnation and to the means of our engagement with it. The divine Word is inexhaustible and yet it is our joy and privilege to let that Word shape and move our hearts and minds, to let that Word take flesh in us as the moving principle of our thoughts and actions. John counters the easy gnosticisms, ancient and modern, which view the material world as a static evil from which we seek to escape in

some flight of spiritual fantasy. That is to deny the truth of the Word made flesh, the Word proclaimed and written which bears eloquent testimony to the divine Word which creates and redeems, the divine Word in which we have fellowship with the mystery of God as Trinity.

That the world could not contain the books that should be written is testament to the inexhaustible mystery of God. It does not mean that God is unthinkable; only that God is far more and beyond all human knowing. John's last word is a check on our human hubris that tries to reduce all things to ourselves. The witness of John the Evangelist is about the mystery of God with whom we have fellowship and joy by being possessed by God rather than presuming to possess God ourselves. Through his witness "*we beh[old] his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father*", the one who is "*full of grace and truth*". That is more than all the books that could conceivably be written and that the world could contain. The mystery of God is always more.

"Even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written"

Fr. David Curry

Feast of St. John the Evangelist, 2016

*“Rachel weeping for her children, And would not be comforted,
because they are not”*

There is no more disturbing and troubling image than the deaths of the little ones whether as here in the witness of the Scriptures or in the horrendous pictures of the suffering children of the world – in Calais, in Aleppo, in Kenya and elsewhere. We live in a world where children are not only commodities but collateral damage in the pursuit of power and dominance. There is no innocence, it seems.

There is blood in Bethlehem. To be sure, we have already seen blood, as it were, in the martyrdom of St. Stephen who was stoned to death confessing Christ and in imitation of the sacrificial sufferings of Christ. But that was in Jerusalem. Here we have the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, as they have been called, in Bethlehem, killed as a policy of infanticide in Herod’s effort to eradicate a potential rival to his kingdom. Herod’s policy to kill all the little ones, two years and under in Bethlehem, echoes the policy of infanticide by Pharaoh to control the population of the Hebrews in Egypt out of which came the birth of Moses. Thus we are made aware of a deeper theological idea, the idea that God and God alone can make something good out of the machinations of human evil.

“Never that which is shall die”, a famous fragment from the Greek poet, Euripides, avers. In a way, the Christian story both challenges and confirms his poetic insight. Christ, the everlasting Son of the Father, comes to redeem and save by dying for us. His rising to life again though is testament to the greater power and truth of God who ever is, the God who negates the negation, as it were. The death of death itself is accomplished in the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *“Never that which is shall die”* because it dies and lives again for it is what lives forever. Love conquers all because love never dies.

This is all part of the dark mystery and wonder of the disturbing Christmas feast of the Holy Innocents. They are innocent because in truth they are unable to harm and yet they are seen as a threat to Herod just by virtue of being infants like the child king sought by the Magi. They are already viewed as *in Christ* and that is the deeper wonder that redeems the horror and their slaughter. Their deaths, like the deaths of the little ones throughout history, are not without meaning. They share in the infancy of Christ and so in the purpose of Christ’s coming.

The Collect expresses all of this in very direct ways, ways that have often been difficult for many to grasp. *“Thou madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths”* is a hard truth, and yet a necessary truth for it speaks to the evil of our world and day, the evil of our political obsessions and the lust for power, to the envy and fear that accompanies all authority which forgets that it has no power except it were granted by God.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents confronts us with the realities of suffering, of death, and of sorrow. There are real victims of the miscarriage of justice, of the perverse abuse of power then and now. The grief of mothers mourning the loss of children is a constant and a never-ending cry. It convicts us of the world of evil and wickedness and even our

own helplessness in the face of the horrors of war and devastation. There are innocent victims. But *The Feast of the Holy Innocents* is not a celebration of victimhood for that is a negative. No. *The Feast of the Holy Innocents* is about our participation in the full meaning of Christ's Incarnation. It teaches us about the love which is never-ending and thus reaches back to the deaths of these little ones and makes them partakers of Christ's passion even as it reaches forward into the horrors of our world and day, the horrors of war and the destruction of "*the inconvenient ones*" in our culture.

That is why we have the reading from *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* which powerfully suggests that they, too, have followed the one who is the Lamb, the sacrificial Lamb of God, and they are the "*redeemed from among men*", "*being the first-fruits unto God, and to the Lamb*". "*They are without fault before the throne of God*".

This is the great comfort that alone counters Rachel's inconsolable grief at the loss of her children "*because they are not.*" They *are* in the love which always is, everlasting. "*Never that which is shall die*" because we live again but only in the love which is now and always. This is the love which comes down at Christmas into our sorry and sad world, the love which redeems us to God and to his eternal fellowship.

*"Rachel weeping for her children, And would not be comforted,
because they are not"*

*Fr. David Curry
The Feast of the Holy Innocents, 2016*

“But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart”

There is a rich fullness to all of the celebrations of Christmas; a kaleidoscope of images in a whirl of sounds and light surrounds us. How do we make sense of it all or indeed of any of it all? It may seem like a whirlwind of things that serve to distract us either to amuse us or destroy us. How are to make sense of the rich fullness of Christmas especially on this *The Octave Day of Christmas*? It is a day, to be sure, which is also designated in other terms at once secular and sacred. It is *The Octave Day of Christmas* which brings us home and into the eternal mystery of Christ’s nativity, gathering into one all of the particulars of our Christmas celebrations. It is *The Circumcision of Christ* which marks another aspect of the mystery of the Incarnation. And to top it off, it is also *New Year’s Day* so as to bring the secular ordering of time into the mystery of God with us. A rich fullness indeed. How are we to make sense of it all?

We are to be like Mary who having heard “*those things which were told them by the shepherds*”, “*kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.*” She doesn’t just hold onto these things zealously clinging to them as we might to our favourite gifts. No, she keeps them “*and ponder[s] them in her heart*”. It is a very rich phrase. The things that have been said and heard are weighed and considered; they are thought upon. To ponder is to give something serious consideration. It is to be attentive to the meaning of what has been said and heard, seen and done.

For what are “*all these things*” which she keeps in her heart? They are all the things which cluster around the angelic announcement to the shepherds about “*a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger*”, a child who is “*born this day in the city of David [as] a Saviour, Christ the Lord*”. It is “*good tidings of great joy*”, to be sure, but even more a mystery to be considered. The shepherds say one to another, “*Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass,*” this thing “*which the Lord hath made known to us*”. They are themselves evangelists, the bearers of good news. They do not keep this to themselves but “*made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child*”. All who heard it “*wondered at those things which were told them*”. Mary, too, it seems, but even more she “*kept all these things and pondered them in her heart*”. That is the mystery of the Church and her purpose and being. We are to be like Mary.

Such is the meaning of our Liturgy. It is altogether about our “*keep[ing] all these things and ponder[ing] them in [our] hearts*”. “*This thing which is come to pass*” is, literally, ‘this saying that has happened’. It is, in other words, the Word made flesh, God made man, a wonder to be sure, a wonder to be kept and thought about now and ever, a wonder that we can never exhaust. Christmas is precisely about the fullness of images and not the emptying of images as in Buddhism, for instance. It is about thinking upon the mystery and letting the mystery penetrate our hearts and minds.

Part of the mystery concerns *The Circumcision of Christ*, following a custom and practice in Israel of the consecration of males on the eighth day to the things of the Law – a form of spiritual identity signalled through a mark in the body. The Litany in its original English translation from the Latin by Thomas Cranmer coupled together the nativity

and the circumcision, accepting these things together as belonging to the very nature of the Incarnation in terms of God's embrace of the particularity of our humanity in order to redeem the whole of humanity. As one of our Anglican divines, John Hackett wonderfully observes, "*Christ is man born of woman to redeem both sexes*". It is also about the role of Israel in the working out of human redemption. Christ embraces the Law to fulfill the Law. For all of our squeamishness about something so physical and so bodily, there is something else about the circumcision which belongs profoundly to the Christmas mystery. There is blood in Bethlehem, we noted already in the disturbing feast of *Holy Innocents*; the blood of the little ones already joined to the sacrifice of Christ. But here too there is the shedding of blood, the blood of Christ; the circumcision already points us to the Cross and to the form of our spiritual identity as signed with the cross in our baptisms. The circumcision belongs to the bodily reality of Christ, to the reality of the Incarnation and to its deeper meaning. We can only ponder - think about - these things and so attend to the mystery of God's engagement with our humanity and our world.

Only Luke tells us about the custom of circumcision and connects it with the naming of the child. The naming and the circumcision go together even as for Christians, baptism and naming or 'Christening' go together. The lesson from *Isaiah* is a joyous hymn of praise to the idea of a redeemer whose 'names' signal redemption and salvation, names that are like titles which open us out to the rich fullness of the mystery of Christ's holy birth. Here too is the prophetic word of *Isaiah* that informs the angel's word to the shepherds. "*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given,*" *Isaiah* says. "*For unto you is born this day ... a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord,*" the angel says, the anointed one of God who is God with us. "*And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace*". Wonderful words full of weight and meaning, to be sure. Wonderful words which complement the Gospel for this day and season.

New Year's Day is a later add-on. It wasn't until the mid-eighteenth century that England caught up to the rest of Europe in changing and updating the Gregorian calendar, itself a correction to the Julian calendar. For centuries the new year began with *The Feast of the Annunciation* to Mary celebrated on March 25th, the proper beginning, we might say, of Christ's Incarnation since that feast marks his conception in the womb of Mary through her active acquiescence to the Word and Will of God. "*Be it unto me according to thy Word*". That Word takes flesh in her and comes to birth now in this holy season. Out of the darkness of her womb, out of the darkness of nature, out of the greater darkness of our darkened and despairing world comes the great light of God's Word and Son and Light who comes to bring us joy and hope.

But only if we ponder "*all these things*", all the things which belong to the witness of God's engagement with our humanity. Mary's "*keeping all these things and pondering them in her heart*" signals the life and mission of the Church. It belongs to the fullness of this Christmas gathering that we ponder and think upon the riches of God's Word coming to us. We have to think it in order to enter into its meaning for us.

Our service of Christmas Lessons and Carols, itself a kind of extension of the great Advent Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, is one way in which we are like Mary both keeping these things - all the things that are connected to the mystery of Christ - and pondering them in our hearts and voices. We listen and think but we also stand and sing. The carols are one of the conduits of our thinking upon the great mystery of Christmas, one of the ways in which the joys of the season penetrate our hearts, at once making us more thoughtful but also moving us to act upon what we have heard, seen and sung. By keeping and pondering these things like Mary we are gathered more fully into the mystery of God with us and set into motion in the things of the new year, our wonder becoming our witness to all these things.

“But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart”

Fr. David Curry

Octave Day of Christmas, 2017