

**ADVENT & CHRISTMAS HOMILIES AT
CHRIST CHURCH
WINDSOR, NOVA SCOTIA**



**FR. DAVID CURRY
2018**

“Love is the fulfilling of the law”

Today’s Collect draws explicitly upon the rich imagery of the Epistle reading from *Romans*, the images of “cast[ing] off the works of darkness” and “put[ting] on the armour of light.” The Gospel reading from *Matthew* complements and illustrates this teaching. We are awakened to the necessity of an ethical principle and to its presence in our lives. That is the meaning of the Advent of Christ, the coming of Christ.

The Epistle opens with a commentary on the law as fulfilled in the love of neighbour. “Love,” Paul argues, “is the fulfilling of the law.” Law is love? That must seem rather strange yet it goes to the heart of the matter of God as the ethical principle for our lives. The law proclaims God’s will for our humanity and as such illumines the darkness of our lives. Left to ourselves, to “the devices and desires of our own hearts,” we are deadly and destructive, harmful to ourselves and to one another. The biblical story of Cain and Abel, the first murder, inaugurates the long bloody tale of man’s inhumanity towards his fellow man. Thus it serves to highlight the need for an ethical principle which by definition cannot come from us; it is not a human construct, but something divine through which we learn the true worth and dignity of our humanity.

The story of Cain and Abel is followed by the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, and, then, the Mosaic covenant in an ascending order of completeness and universality, the meaning of which is summarized in Paul’s statement that “love is the fulfilling of the law.” Love of God and love of neighbour are inseparable.

We often misunderstand the Ten Commandments and confuse the ethical teaching they present with our more ordinary assumptions about laws and legislation, about rules and customs as something constraining and limiting. To the contrary, we are presented with something much more radical and much more freeing. We forget that the Ten Commandments are about our freedom, our liberation, and that they are grounded in the revelation of God to Moses as “I am Who I am,” as the universal principle upon which the being and knowing of all reality depends. “I am has sent you,” God says to Moses. The Ten Commandments begin with God as “I am”: “I am the Lord thy God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” The law is the charter of our freedom, our freedom to God. That freedom is love in its truest sense

The Ten Commandments are the universal moral code for our humanity. And while given authoritatively, they can also be known through natural reason. John Chrysostom remarks in the 4th century that nine of the Ten Commandments are known by natural reason. Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish theologian writing in Arabic in Cairo, especially emphasizes that the first two commandments about the existence and the unity of God are known by natural reason. This is to say that they are universal truths.

More than a list of proscriptions and commands, they form an integral whole. They ground our life in God. *Because God is God*, there are no other gods but God. *Because God is God*, He is not to be confused with anything, absolutely anything else, in creation; the distinction between Creator and created is absolute. *Because God is God*, His name - “I am

Who I am" - is not to be taken in vain, not to be casually and carelessly invoked, not to be used profanely which is to say for other purposes than what belongs to the principle of being and truth. Profane means what is before or outside the temple as standing in opposition to the Holy. *Because God is God*, we are to "remember the Sabbath" to "keep it holy." Why? Chrysostom thought this was the one commandment that was particular to the Jewish story and, indeed, it is, but creation is universal and while the story of creation talks symbolically about the six days of creation and the idea of the sabbath rest on the seventh, surely the idea of a time for rest and reflection, for contemplation, is universal. Contemplation, as Aristotle argues, is the highest life for humans.

Remembering the Sabbath recalls us to creation and thus to the Creator as a principle that is to be honoured with respect to the ordering of time. Joseph Pieper reminds us of a deep truth which our world has largely forgotten, namely, the proper meaning of leisure. In our culture, *we live to work*. This is one of our problems which stands in stark contrast to the wisdom of the Hebrews and the Greeks where *we work to live*. The Greek and Latin words for leisure are *skole* and *scola* from which we get the word, school. School, properly understood is leisure, our freedom from the pressing necessities of everyday life. Aristotle literally says "we are un-leisurely in order to have leisure." Work is un-leisure, literally, *a-scolia*. Similarly in the Latin, busyness is *neg-otium*, literally, the negating of leisure. Thus, leisure is the freedom to contemplate, to wonder at the mysteries of life, and, ultimately, to take delight in the things of God. A profoundly counter-culture idea and yet how necessary and how freeing! Once again, we are freed to God and to the truth of ourselves in God, to our good as found in Him. Without it we are lost in all of the distractions of ourselves, unable to focus; literally, uncollected.

The Ten Commandments divide between our duty to God and our duty towards our neighbour, meaning our fellow human beings. With the fifth commandment, we turn explicitly to our relations with one another, recalling first, a fundamental feature of human life. We all come from a mother and a father. Regardless of how we feel about our parents and by extension all our family relations, they are inescapably and undeniably our parents and our relations. We, literally, have no say in that. What we can do is honour our natural derivations, honour the natural sources of our being. That is our freedom. Once again, this recalls us to the order of creation and so to God.

"*Thou shalt do no murder.*" We are not the authors of our own being let alone the arbiters of the existence of others. The necessary truth here is that human existence is to be honoured and respected and not denied and destroyed especially since we are made in "the image of God." To kill another is to deny the image of God in the other and in ourselves. "*Thou shalt not commit adultery*" is the seventh commandment and reminds us that we are *sexual beings* and that marriage is to be honoured and respected as belonging as well to our relationship with God. "*Thou shalt not steal*" reminds us that property is an extension of personality and that the distinction between mine and thine is to be respected. "*Thou shalt not bear false witness*" goes to one of the distinctive features of our humanity. We are *language beings*, beings endowed with tongues and speech which are to be used for speaking truth, not spreading lies. "*Thou shalt not covet*" brings us to the

last commandment and speaks to our hearts as the seat of all our desires. To covet is to want what belongs to someone else. It concerns what is *within* us.

Thus the commandments provide a complete picture of the principal aspects of human life. They are the ethical principles which inform and shape the particular rules and laws of our cultures and communities, the informing and animating principles without which we are lost in ourselves. They ground our relationships with one another in our relationship with God. This is their signal power and truth.

There are different traditions about the numbering of the Ten Commandments. Anglicans, along with other reformed traditions as well as Eastern Orthodoxy, speak of the ten in the order enumerated in the Prayer Book. Roman Catholics and Lutherans collapse the second commandment about graven images into the first and divide the tenth commandment about not coveting into two: the coveting of things and persons.

In the Advent of Christ, love is the fulfilling of the law, its true meaning. How does this relate to the Gospel about Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem? The story of Christ's triumphant *Palm Sunday* entry into Jerusalem is also the Gospel for *The First Sunday in Advent*. Why? Because it signals the purpose of God's coming to us. It signals the idea of redemption, of the light of God in Christ which illumines and overcomes the darkness of our hearts. We know the story. We who shout *Hosanna* shall also cry, *Crucify*. Thus, Archbishop Cranmer thought it wise to continue the Gospel passage to include the cleansing of the Temple. It serves to remind us of our darkness, of our misuse of the good things of God, of our misuse of the Temple as the place of our truest leisure, our skole, in learning about God's will for us in our lives. Our hearts are the temples that need the cleansing grace of Christ. Thus the Gospel illustrates the Advent theme of "*casting off the works of darkness*" in order to "*put on the armour of Christ*," a casting *out* in order to learn to take delight *in* God and in God's being with us.

Such is the point of Advent. It awakens us to our need for God our Redeemer, the one who comes to the darkness of our world and our hearts as light and joy and grace. Such is the divine love in which the law is fulfilled and has its meaning. Such is the grace of Advent.

"Love is the fulfilling of the law"

Fr. David Curry
Advent 1, 2018

“My words shall not pass away.”

Here are words “*written for our learning*” but only through our sitting and listening. Here are words “*written for our learning*” about hope and comfort in times of darkness, danger, and despair. Here are words audible and written, yes, but also words made visible. “*He hath instituted and ordained holy mysteries, as pledges of his love, and for a continual remembrance of his death, to our great and endless comfort,*” as the *Exhortation* so rarely heard so wonderfully puts it (BCP, pp. 88-89). Words written for our learning.

The *Exhortation* speaks to the character of this Sunday which is sometimes known as Bible Sunday because of the Collect composed by Cranmer. It calls attention to the reason and purpose of the Scriptures. The Sacraments, too, belong to that understanding of the purposes of God for our humanity. If you read the *Proper Preface* used for *Passiontide*, for Passion Sunday right through to Maundy Thursday (BCP, p. 80), you will find that the *Exhortation* draws directly upon it. We give thanks “*for the redemption of the world by the death and passion of our Saviour Christ, both God and Man; who did humble himself, even to the death upon the Cross, for us sinners, who lay in darkness and the shadow of death; that he might make us the children of God, and exalt us to everlasting life.*” The *Exhortation* adds only one word, miserable, “*miserable sinners.*” Sinners in misery because sin is misery.

Yet here is our comfort: “*the patience and comfort of thy holy Word,*” and the “*great and endless comfort*” of “*the holy mysteries,*” the Sacraments which “*he hath instituted and ordained as pledges of his love, and for a continual remembrance of his death, to our great and endless comfort.*” Word and Sacrament conveying hope and comfort.

The two *Exhortations* appended to the Communion service underscore an important reformation ideal. Both Cranmer and Calvin sought to increase the frequency of Communion and especially the reception of the Sacrament over and against the practice of Mass in the late Medieval world largely as a spectator event: *seeing* the host elevated, even through a squint (literally a hole in the wall!), but *receiving* the Sacrament very infrequently. The insight of the reformers was essentially a Scriptural insight into the purpose of the Sacraments as revealed in the witness of the Scriptures: “*Take eat ... Drink ye all, of this ... in remembrance of me.*” Such is “*the memorial which he hath commanded,*” (BCP, p. 83). It is about taking seriously the things which have been written. It is about words “*hear[d], read, mark[ed], learn[ed], and inwardly digest[ed]*” as Cranmer so famously and memorably puts it. Such words are the clarion call and challenge to the recovery of deep reading over and against the superficiality of our digital compulsions, the ephemerality of flickering images.

This morning’s Epistle and Gospel complement one another. That may strike you as rather strange. What comfort and hope is there in the thundering words of the Gospel about “*signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity*”? Sounds too much like the evening news or fake news, alt news, whatever, of our modern discontents and unease! “*The sea and the waves roaring,*” oh no, another climate change disaster story! “*Men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking*

after those things which are coming on the earth," more negativity and anxiety! Where is the good in that? What comfort? What hope?

"For the powers of heaven shall be shaken." Now there is a reason to pause and think. It implies a connection between our earthly lives and heaven. The idea that heaven itself is troubled and shaken by the things on earth that trouble us and make us fearful is itself troubling and yet terribly instructive about how we read the Scriptures.

It is really only a way of speaking to make us more thoughtful, more attentive, a way of speaking that recalls us to Creation and Providence. What happens in our lives does matter and has altogether to do with God and our lives with God. That is the real point and the real comfort and the real hope for the whole world, for Jew and Gentile alike, as Paul states. Our comfort and our hope are found in *"the God of hope"* who comes to us out of the pageant of the Hebrew Scriptures, out of the *"things [which] were written aforetime,"* as Paul suggests, to teach us things for our good. The *"things written aforetime [which] were written for our learning"* will come to include Paul's own words as well. The Scriptures, ultimately, are the words of the one whose *"words shall not pass away"* even as *"heaven and earth shall pass away"* because God's Word written and proclaimed, God's Word celebrated and received, *is eternal.* It is really all about God's engagement with us and with our world. We are being recalled to God and to the world in God. That is the good news and the hope of the Gospel. It is conveyed to us through things *"written for our learning"* about what is everlasting.

In a way, this Sunday presents a strong counter argument to the forms of anti-religious anti-intellectualism in our culture and church. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are inescapably and necessarily logocentric, word-centered. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism are also religions that place a high value on the wisdom of sacred texts. So, too, the great philosophical traditions are shaped by intertextual dialogue and discourse about high matters of mind and spirit. On the other hand, the forms of secular humanism regnant in our world and day are morally and ethically bankrupt precisely through the turn towards the legal and the material, including *"a denial of human evil"*, points which Alexandr Solzhenitsyn in his 1978 Harvard Address made very clearly. *"We turned our backs on the Spirit,"* he notes in his critique of the West, and are experiencing *"the calamity of a despiritualized and irreligious humanistic consciousness"* in which we deprive ourselves of *"our most precious possession - our spiritual life."* He argues that *"hastiness and superficiality are the psychic diseases of the 20th century,"* seen most notably in the Press. Advent is a wake-up call to who we are in the sight of God and to the necessity of deep reading; in short, to contemplation.

As such it means hearing these thundering words of judgement about the darkness and the fears that inhabit a world in which we are left to ourselves and to the narrowness of our material pursuits, a world in which we cling to things which by their very nature *"pass away"* and ignore the words of Christ that *"shall not pass away."* It means contemplation, that truest form of leisure, that active attention to the things of God which can only come to us. We can't make them; we can only attend to them. Advent is

our waiting and watching upon the words of God coming to us *"in clouds descending"* as one of our hymns puts it.

That is Paul's point about things *"written for our learning,"* things given for us to think. Such is the wonderous pageant of Advent. *"We ought, so far as in us lies,"* Aristotle says, *"to put on immortality, and do all that we can to live in conformity with the highest that is in us."* Such is the activity of contemplation to which our liturgy constantly calls us. Did we not hear last week to *"put on the Lord Jesus Christ"*? To do so is to attend to something divine within us which is given by God to us. That will be to discover our true self, our true individuality. *"The best and most pleasant life is the life of the intellect, since the intellect is in the fullest sense the man"* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10. vii). In short, it concerns the whole of our humanity, the fullest sense of ourselves.

We are bidden to attend to the things *"written for our learning,"* the words of Christ which *"shall not pass away."* Such things are constantly before us. Our liturgy is about the eternal presence of God in the midst of the changing, passing affairs of the world. Such is the Word made flesh given to nourish and feed us in the holy mysteries of Word and Sacrament. Here is light and grace for all of us *"miserable sinners who lay in darkness and the shadow of death."* Here is everlasting life for which *"we are most bounden"* to give him *"continual thanks."* Such is our hope and comfort.

"My words shall not pass away."

Fr. David Curry
Advent 2, 2018

Behold, I send my messenger ... which shall prepare thy way before thee

Advent is the season of penitential preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Repentance and rejoicing go hand in hand. Both these tonal qualities of spiritual life belong to the theme of preparation signalled so directly in the Collect, Epistle and Gospel for this day and heralded so profoundly in the second *Exhortation* which you heard this morning. Advent celebrates the motion of God's Word coming to us *in judicio*, in judgement, *in mente*, in mind, and, ultimately, *in carne*, in the flesh. That motion is all God towards us; all grace, we might say. The important point of Advent is that grace can never be taken for granted. It requires our attention, our loving attention upon the motions of God's Word coming *to us* and being *with us*. It requires preparation on our part to receive that Word in its glory and truth. Only so is it grace to us.

The preparation is all grace, to be sure, but it concerns our mindfulness of that grace. That is the point of the *Exhortation*, so rarely read and heard. We are in Advent and yet always "*in the mean season*", always in anticipation and expectation of things which remain to be more fully realized in us. As such we are bidden "*to consider the dignity of that holy mystery*", the Sacrament of the Altar, "*and the need of devout preparation for the receiving thereof.*" Devout preparation. It belongs to "*the ministers and stewards of [those] mysteries*" to "*prepare and make ready thy way*", the way of God, in all our hearts "*by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just*". Such is repentance. It is about our being turned back to God from whom we have turned away. It is simply about our complete surrender of ourselves to God's will for our humanity. Thus the witness of John the Baptist about repentance is wonderfully complemented by witness of the Blessed Virgin Mary whose 'yes' to God belongs so completely to the mystery of the Incarnation.

Today's Gospel calls our attention to the ministry of John the Baptist even as this week also reminds us of the Annunciation to Mary as an essential part of the Advent. "*Be it unto me according to thy word*", is Mary's mantra and the mantra of the Church universal in all times and seasons but especially in this season of the coming of God Incarnate, itself the crystallization of all of the motions of God's Word coming to us. The preparation is about our mindfulness. It means, as the *Exhortation* suggests, a certain kind of self-examination, a matter of the inward spirit, a matter of conscience and soul-searching to the intent of the quieting of all our doubts and fears, of all our anxieties and worries, by recalling us to trust in God. The second *Exhortation* is very precise about what such examination means in terms of seeking reconciliation with one another as belonging to the "*full purpose of amendment of life.*"

It calls us to account so that we may indeed "*reverence the holy mysteries of thy body and blood*" and so perceive "*within ourselves the fruits of thy redemption*" as the Collect for Maundy Thursday so powerfully puts it. Just as the first *Exhortation* recalls us to the Proper Preface for Passiontide, so, too, the second *Exhortation* recalls us to Holy Week and to the theme of the wedding garment or marriage garment in the late Trinity season: "*so that ye may come holy and clean to such a heavenly Feast, in the marriage-garment required by God in holy Scripture*" without which we cannot "*be received as worthy partakers*

of that holy Table." Our worthiness does not lie in ourselves but only in our trust in God which is the burden of the Prayer of Humble Access. *"We do not presume to come to this thy Table ... trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies."* Wonderful words.

And yet there is always the danger that such *Exhortations* to such preparations only add to an anxiety and a spirit of being overly scrupulous, overthinking ourselves or thinking too much about ourselves rather than keeping our focus on what God seeks for us. Such is the danger of the doctrine of assurance which is easily misconstrued by placing all the emphasis upon our feelings about ourselves rather than our trust in the goodness of God. Our good, our perfection, as it were, is not and cannot be a human construct. We are called to Another, the One who comes, in whom, as Jesus says, there is healing and wholeness. That ultimately is the point of John's question. *"Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?"* Jesus' response to John's disciples is precise: *"Go and tell John again those things which ye do hear and see"*. And what are those things? *"The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them."* Wonderful words used in the great Advent Bidding Prayer in the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, they speak to the darkness of our world and day, to the darkness of our humanity.

The burden of today's Gospel is about the place of John the Baptist in the economy, in the working out, of human redemption. Here Jesus says something extraordinary. He defines completely the ministry of John the Baptist. It is the ministry of preparation by way of repentance. John is his messenger, he says, quoting Isaiah, literally, an angel, for that is the meaning of angels - they are the messengers of God. As such it complements the role of Mary, the theotokos, the God-bearer, the one in whom Christ becomes incarnate because of her *fiat mihi*, her *"be it unto me,"* in response to the Angel of the Advent, Gabriel. That, too, is preparation, indeed of the highest and purest sort. Mary yields completely the whole of her being to the will of God in whom we find the truth of our being. Thus Mary and John the Baptist are the quintessential figures of the Advent. They point us to Christ and to the divine preparations which God makes in and through us for his coming to us.

Messengers, ministers and stewards are not just the clergy but through them all of us are called to be messengers, ministers and stewards of the mysteries of God each in our own way. The divine preparations for those holy mysteries require our attention and mindfulness, our commitment and service both for ourselves and for one another in the body of Christ, the Church. It is *"an easy matter"* to excuse ourselves from receiving communion, the Exhortation notes, pleading our own *"worldly business"* or busyness! To know ourselves as *"grievous sinners"* is only sincere if it is followed with repentance and amendment of life in the recognition that it is our *"duty to receive the holy Communion."*

To plead our unworthiness as an excuse is to remain trapped in ourselves, in our own self-willfulness, literally placing ourselves before God and his will for us declared so directly and clearly in the Gospel of Christ. In so doing we separate ourselves from one another, from our brethren. We separate ourselves from the body of Christ because we

refuse the preparations of the Gospel. The awakening to conscience means exactly what the *Exhortation* bids us: “to prepare yourselves, and to come to feed upon the banquet of this most heavenly Food.” Our liturgy is itself part of that preparation through the rhythms of contrition, confession and satisfaction which turn us to Christ and to his presence with us. Such really is our joy and our good; *a rejoicing in repentance* for such is the preparation of the way of Christ in us.

Behold, I send my messenger ... which shall prepare thy way before thee

Fr. David Curry
Advent 3, 2018

My Lord, and my God

'From darkness and doubt, Good Lord, deliver us.' It could be a paraphrase of the Litany. We have heard, too, in the Exhortations to Communion about confession, even private confession, as belonging to our coming to Communion, *"with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience,"* including *"the avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness"* (BCP, p. 91). There is a wonderful paradox that we commemorate Thomas, the one who is known as *'doubting Thomas'* for through his doubt, our faith is confirmed all the more.

In the time of the longest night in the darkness of nature's year, we look to the Light of Christ coming in the darkness when we will hear that *"the darkness overcame it not."* Likewise with the matters of doubt and uncertainty in our souls. Advent is the season of watching and waiting in the darkness. What do we mean by darkness? Is it simply the absence of light? Are we bereft and left simply with our doubts and fears?

St. Thomas is the saint of the Advent even more so than St. Andrew whose feast usually but not always falls within the Advent season. The Feast of St. Thomas always falls just four days before Christmas; the only variable is whether it falls within the week of the Third or the Fourth Sunday in Advent, or when the 21st of December is the Fourth Sunday in Advent, it gets transferred to the following Tuesday (Dec. 23rd.) In any event, it is always in Advent.

It is significant that the Gospel reading is the Easter story about Thomas' doubting the witness of the other disciples to the Resurrection of Jesus. *"Except I shall see,"* he says, *except I touch, "put[ting] my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust[ing] my hand into his side, I will not believe."* It is a powerful moment. But behind the closed doors of the Upper Room, Christ appears again to the disciples and, most importantly, to Thomas. *"Thomas,"* he says, *"Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing."* It is a marvellous moment of truth and of our awakening to truth in the ways that belong to each of our forms of knowing.

We are not told whether Thomas did reach forth finger and hands and touch the Risen Christ. We are told that Thomas sought for a kind of empirical proof that the person whom he had personally known and followed, whom he thought was dead, was truly alive. The encounter with the Risen Christ confirms that reality. Thomas' words are the great words of faith, *"My Lord, and my God,"* he simply says. It is a kind of breakthrough of the understanding. To see the real truth and substance of things in and through the flesh. The body matters. It is not everything but it is not nothing either.

Such is the Incarnation and hence the reason why Thomas' feast prepares us for Christ's holy birth. As Thomas Aquinas notes, his doubting provides the greater certainty for our faith, a teaching which forms the basis for the Collect. From doubtfulness about Jesus' resurrection to faith in the resurrection, we are awakened to faith in Jesus Christ.

“Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt, to believe in thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in thy sight may never be reprov’d.”

I like to think of Thomas’ doubting as being like the darkness of our unknowing. Something not simply negative but positive in the sense that the darkness also prepares us for our coming to the light of Christ. We need the darkness, as it were, to awaken us to the truth and knowledge of the light which we cannot conceive but only receive.

Thomas’ doubting is really a kind of questioning. In other words, a seeking to know, and therefore it accords with the forms of knowing that belong to our humanity. To Mary Magdalene, Jesus had just said in the very same chapter of John’s Gospel, *“touch me not”*; now Jesus says to Thomas, reach out and touch. That acknowledges the different qualities of soul and its powers of knowing that are appropriate to each person. For both there is an overcoming, the overcoming of sorrow, in the case of Mary Magdalene; of doubt, in the case of Thomas. And all to our benefit, to the awakening to faith in us and to a deeper trust in God’s mercy and all at the darkest time of nature’s year. The Feast of Thomas awakens us to a more profound understanding of the mystery of God and a deeper understanding of our humanity as *“fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God”*, of our being *“an habitation of God through the Spirit,”* as the Epistle reading from Ephesians so wonderfully reminds us.

Thomas’ words are the great words of faith that see within the veil of the flesh the invisible things of God. *“Faith, our outward sense befriending makes our inward vision clear,”* as Thomas Aquinas’ great eucharistic hymn, the *Tantum Ergo* of the *Pange Lingua*, puts it. *Praestet fides supplementum, sensuum defectui*. Faith supplying what the senses lack, really, and as such an acknowledgment of the limitations to our human knowing, on the one hand, and the recognition of the principle of divine knowing upon which all our knowing depends, on the other hand.

At mass, during the great Eucharistic prayer, you have perhaps heard me quietly say or mumble something at the time of the consecration of the bread and the wine. They are the words of Thomas said with respect to the sacrament, *Dominus meus, Deus meus, “My Lord, and my God”*. They are the words, too, that belong to our coming to Christ’s holy nativity when we behold the babe of Bethlehem, and say *“My Lord, and my God.”* Such is the witness of Thomas in awakening us to faith and knowledge in God’s being with us. Such is the light of faith that overcomes all the darkness of doubt.

My Lord, and my God.

Fr. David Curry
Eve of the Feast of St. Thomas
December 20th, 2018

The Lord is at hand

Advent reaches a high note of expectancy just as the questions of the Advent season come to a kind of crescendo on this *The Fourth Sunday in Advent*. Both Epistle and Gospel open us out to the “*bountiful grace and mercy*” of God coming to us in the quiet waiting and watching of Advent.

“*The Lord is at hand*”, Paul proclaims in his *Letter to the Philippians* and there is in this a wonderful sense of joy. “*Rejoice in the Lord alway, and again I say, Rejoice.*” God is the Lord and as God he is *always* at hand, *always* present, *always* near. Such is the truth of God. Such, we might say, is the simple “*givenness of things*”, as the novelist and modern reformed theologian, Marilynne Robinson, so wisely notes. The simple “*givenness of things*” is about the truth of God in whom all things have their being and their meaning. To be open to that realization is our joy which contrasts completely with the despairing nihilism which sees reality as something into which we are simply thrown, “*the thrownness of being*”, you might say. As if life and human experience were but an empty nothingness, altogether meaningless and without purpose or understanding. Such a view is utterly dogmatic and narrow. We need the questions of Advent to awaken us out of our various dogmatic slumbers, to awaken us to the divine gift of a world given for thought and delight.

The questions of Advent are more about us, about our understanding of God whose truth and majesty is eternal and as such is always with us. It is you and me who absent ourselves from the idea and the presence of God.

Advent prepares us for the radical Christian understanding of God being at hand, always near and always coming to us. That Christian understanding focuses primarily upon the coming of Christ and as such upon the meaning of God with us in the great defining term, “*Emmanuel*”, which means God with us. This morning we will sing the greatest of the Advent carols, the *Veni Emmanuel*, a 12th century medieval carol which enlarges in rich and wonderful scriptural terms the meaning of Christ as Emmanuel, God with us.

The Gospel for this day is known as the Record or the Witness of John. It abounds with questions. They are all questions about John the Baptist. “*Who art thou?*” the Priests and Levites from Jerusalem ask him. There is a kind of urgency in the question. “*I am not the Christ*” he replies, answering in the negative to what is clearly being assumed in the question. The question signals an expectation about the coming of the anointed one of God, the Christ. “*What then? Art thou Elijah?*” they ask, referencing one of the great and unusual prophetic figures of the Old Testament who became associated with the expectation of the coming of the Messiah and who was thought to have ascended into heaven. It is, again, a powerful association that signals something of the strangeness of John the Baptist. To this question, he simply answers, “*No.*” “*Who art thou?*” they ask again, “*that we may give an answer to them that sent us.*” And then comes one of the more intriguing questions that speaks directly to us in the quietness of Advent. “*What sayest thou of thyself?*”

All these questions are about John the Baptist but in the light of questions about God and Israel, about God and the world. What, then, is the witness of John? Well, it is *not* about himself. It is *not* about our preoccupations with ourselves for that is the way of darkness and despair. *Christmas* is *not* about calling attention to ourselves in our neediness and in our desire to control. John turns all the questions about himself into a witness to Christ, culminating in the last phrase of the Gospel reading. He sees Jesus coming unto him and says, "*Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.*" He points us to Jesus, to "*the Lord [who] is at hand,*" present and always coming unto us.

About himself, he states that he is only to be understood in relation to the Lord. "*I am,*" he says, "*the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord,*" quoting "*the prophet Isaiah.*" It is a famous statement. *Vox clamantis in deserto.* The world is a desert, a wilderness as a result of our separation of ourselves from God the Creator in the story of the Fall. But God does not forsake his creation but seeks our redemption. A way, a path is made for the Lord in the wilderness of human sin and darkness. John the Baptist is the last of the prophets and, as Jesus said in last week's Gospel, "*more than a prophet*" because he stands on the threshold of the fulfillment of all prophecy. What is that? Simply the insight into the presence of God with us now in the intimacy of Christ, now in the image of Christ as the Lamb of God. It is an image of sacrificial love.

We have not exhausted all the questions about John the Baptist. In naming his role and mission as the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord, the Pharisees then ask, "*Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?*" These are all questions that relate to a sense of expectancy about the coming of a Messiah, a Saviour, but with all of the ambiguity about what that might mean. Something political and worldly? The triumph of one nation, one party, one tribe, over others? John's answer once again turns us to Jesus Christ and to the meaning of his advent, his coming. John's ministry is the preparation for that greater coming, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He points us to Christ and awakens us to what we truly seek and need, the forgiveness of sins. "*Behold, the Lamb of God,*" he says.

That is the point of the darkness of Advent. It awakens us to the need and the desire for the healing light and grace of Christ, the one whom John identifies as "*the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,*" an image concentrated for us in our liturgy in the words of the *Agnus Dei* and in the *Gloria* (which we will sing again at Christmas). Such words highlight that "*the Lord is at hand.*" His truth and presence are always with us. What is needed is our being prepared to behold him and to take delight in his truth and grace. Such will be our Christmas, our being with Emmanuel who is God with us. Like John the Baptist, it will be a matter of our witness in receiving him as Lord and Saviour, our Emmanuel.

The Lord is at hand

Fr. David Curry
Advent 4, 2018

When all things were in quiet silence and the night was in the midst of her swift course,
then thy almighty word leapt down from heaven, from thy royal throne.

I have to confess that this lovely image from the Wisdom of Solomon (18.15) has always captivated my imagination. It captures wonderfully the special mystery of *Christmas* and complements the extraordinary readings we have already heard. The readings from *Hebrews* and from *The Prologue of John's Gospel* challenge all our conceptions about *Christmas*. For where in those readings do we hear any mention of a babe born in a manger, any mention of little Bethlehem, any mention of Mary, the Virgin Mother, any mention of Joseph, any mention of ox and ass, of sheep and lambs, let alone camels and kangaroos; well, why not or at least a moose or two or maybe a beaver? And yet, all those images are profoundly shaped and governed by the great thunderous words of *The Letter to the Hebrews* and by what is, perhaps, the most profound passage of philosophy and theology that has ever been penned, *The Prologue of John's Gospel*. It is the great *Christmas Gospel*.

"*Thou hast but two rare cabinets full of treasure,*" the poet George Herbert says, and he names them, "*The Trinitie, and Incarnation;/ Thou hast unlockt them both,*" he says, "*And made them jewels to betroth/ The work of thy creation/ Unto thy self in everlasting pleasure*" (*Ungratefulnesse*). The mystery of *Christmas* enclosed in a poetic nutshell! But one worth cracking open. We behold simply a double mystery, the mystery of God and the mystery of our humanity. Both are *locked* up together and both are *unlocked* to view on this holy night.

What on earth am I talking about, you are asking yourselves or at least you should be. Well, I am talking exactly and precisely about the wonder and the mystery of this holy night, the wonder and the mystery of *Christmas*. Something has drawn you here. It certainly isn't the pursuit of profit or prestige. Nothing so contemptible in the contemporary culture than religion, to say nothing of the institutional churches. Certainly no commercial or consumer benefit or gain to be found here; quite the opposite, it might seem that the Church is out for your money, more hands in your pocket than the banks. Just joking. Well, maybe.

No. Something speaks to our souls, it seems to me, that draws us towards the idea of '*truths held sacred*' and all the more so in a culture of darkness and despair. Our culture, our world, our day. It is not that we are simply too much with ourselves, too much preoccupied with a multitude of worries and concerns, what Jesus names, at least in Tyndale's early English translation, as our "*being carefull,*" meaning our being full of cares, our busyness, what has more recently been translated as our *anxiety*. Mightn't we say *Angst r' us* because we are too full of cares about all the wrong things and in all the wrong ways, especially, perhaps, at this time of year? I leave it to you to fill out the ledger in terms of your own lives. The stress of presents and meals, of travel and plans, of parents, of grandparents, of in-laws, of the neediness of children and childrens' children; the neediness, let's face it, of us all. No, the greater problem is that we are sceptical and unaware of what speaks to our darkness and despair.

Okay. So you weren't expecting that. But take a deep breath. It's okay. The whole point of tonight's readings and the whole point of this liturgy, this service, is not to judge and condemn. We are all way too good at that already. No need for the Church to get in on the act. Quite the contrary. Here is the counter to all of our angst and distress. It is simply the wonder of God's engagement with our humanity. Here is the mystery of God, the Trinity, and here is the mystery of God with us, Emmanuel, the Incarnation.

God is God with God and in God, the "*one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions;*" for such things as "*body, parts [and] passions,*" belong to our finite world of division, insufficiency, and incompleteness, but God is "*of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness;*" an holy triad worth pondering, to be sure, the mystery into which we are raised just by those words. God is "*the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible*". Wow. Literally mind-blowing! These are words from the first of *The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* for Anglicans. (Don't worry, Anglicans don't have a clue either.)

And yet all this speaks to the deepest desires of our souls and belongs to the fundamental insight and teaching at least of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and beyond. It speaks to our yearning for something more and something lasting beyond the weary and dreary nature of our lives. Here is more than hope. Here is hope's engagement with us and our world. Not just God in his majesty and truth but God *with us* seeking the redemption of our desires, of our sad and sorry lives. "*And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.*" This is the distinctive Christian witness. We don't come to *Christmas* to celebrate ourselves. We come in the awareness of the one who has come to us and who comes to birth in each of us when we begin to grasp the meaning of his being and truth.

"*And the word was made flesh.*" This is the wonder that runs through all the images of the babe in Bethlehem, of shepherds and sheep, of Mary and Joseph, of no room in the inn, of angels, of ox and ass. It is all about the wonder and the mystery of God in himself, the Trinity, embracing us in the Incarnation of his only-begotten Son, God for us, indeed, God with us, Emmanuel.

The great challenge of the Church is to speak about *the mystery of God* without which we cannot make any sense of *the mystery of God with us*. Only so can we begin to have a proper and truer sense of joy in the mystery of one another. All because of God with us.

And how does this relate to our text? In every way. The passage from *The Wisdom of Solomon* is actually a comment on the great Jewish story of the Passover, the story of God's intervening act to deliver Israel from Egyptian domination. In a way, it anticipates the lesson from *Hebrews* that "*God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son.*" In other words, it is about redemption and liberation arising from God himself. So, too, Christmas points us, as our lessons and carols make clear, to Christ as Saviour. Yet he comes not as "*a stern warrior,*" a warrior-saviour, but in the simple humility of a little child. His coming confounds all the pretence of human greatness. Even more, the babe

of Bethlehem is the Christ of Calvary; in short, the lamb of God whose sacrifice at once redeems and reveals.

Here is our *Christmas* blessing. It is found in God himself and in God being with us. This does not privilege us, meaning Christians in whatever denominational confection we might imagine, because it is really for all. Our task is to live in the love of the God who makes himself known to us in humility and truth. The Word and Son of the Father leaps down from heaven, from his royal throne. And yes, heaven is now known on earth but only through our being raised up in joy and peace and in love. "No one has ever seen God," John goes on to tell us in what follows from his Prologue, "but the only-begotten Son has made him known." Something is grasped and made known to us and in us, made known *in our humanity, in and through* the limitations of our world and day. God engages us and opens us out to himself. He is our life. That is the great joy and wonder of *Christmas night*.

The wonder and the mystery of God in his great reaching down to us, his humility, requires of us the same humility in being open to God's gift of himself in Jesus. That compels us to our love and care for one another. For love came down at *Christmas*. Such is the wonder and the mystery of this holy night. It changes everything, if we will let it.

When all things were in quiet silence and the night was in the midst of her swift course,
then thy almighty word leapt down from heaven, from thy royal throne.

Fr. David Curry
Christmas Eve, 2018

And the angel of the Lord came upon them

From the thunderous and majestic words of the great mystery of *Christmas* night of “*the Word made flesh [who] dwelt among us*”, we come to the quiet wonder of *Christmas morning*. A quiet time of contemplation, a time to think with the angels.

The logic of *Christmas* in the classical Common Prayer tradition, liturgically and theologically speaking, is quite instructive. We proceed from the eternal birth, Christ’s eternal Sonship, on *Christmas Eve* with its focus on the Incarnation as grounded in the life of God, God as Trinity, to *the Christmas of the Angels*, as it is sometimes called, who reveal to the shepherds the birth of a Saviour; “*a multitude of the heavenly host praising God*” in the ringing words of what will become the *Gloria*. “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*” This in turn leads to *the Christmas of the Shepherds* on *The Octave Day of Christmas* who say “*Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us,*” words which follow directly upon this morning’s gospel. This logic is the reverse of an older and a modern more linear pattern of celebration but as such grounds everything in the life of God. That is the intriguing and important feature and one which redeems all the wonderful complexity of the images of *Christmas*, both religious and secular in all of their various forms.

Here we have some of the more familiar features of the *Christmas* story as told by *Luke* in a remarkable economy of expression. “*A decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed*” sets Joseph in motion “*with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child*” to Bethlehem. There “*she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*” Such are the basic elements of the story. *Matthew* will also provide an account read on *The Sunday after Christmas* but no mention of a manger or ‘no vacancy’ signs at the inn. Only with the story of the coming of the kings after the birth do we even get the mention of Bethlehem. Joseph, though, is told that the Son “*conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost*” and that his name shall be called Jesus, “*for he shall save his people from their sins,*” and all this in fulfillment of a prophecy from *Isaiah* that “*a Virgin shall conceive ... a Son*” who shall be called “*Emmanuel*” meaning “*God with us.*” Another layer of essential meaning to the basic story, we might say, without which it is not much of a story. Such things complement the real story of *Christmas* in *John* about “*the Word made flesh.*”

Yet how, we might ask, do we come to know this basic story let alone its deeper meaning? Both *Luke* and *Matthew* invoke “*the angel of the Lord*”, the messenger, in *Luke* to tell about “*the shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night*” not to fear for here is “*good tidings of great joy*”; in *Matthew* to advise Joseph to “*fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.*” Angelic salutations, “*Fear not ... For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.*”

But what are we in our pseudo-sophistications to make of such things as an angel and of a Virgin mother? And has *Luke* placed the birth correctly as a result of the census of

Quirinius? There are no end of things which contribute to a certain kind of scepticism and cynical doubt. And yet, I would argue that the rich complexity of the stories of the nativity belong to its essential mystery, the essential mystery of *God in himself* and *God with us*. In every part of the story, if we will think with the angels, we learn something greater that challenges all our sophistic claims to know. We are being opened out to truths which cannot simply be measured empirically or scientifically. More profoundly, as the novelist and modern reformed theologian Marilynne Robinson suggests, modern science itself in discovering its own ontological assumptions brings out many of the same kinds of mysteries that the biblical story presents.

In modern physics, for example, *particle entanglement*, the way particles seem to affect and interact with one another across immense distances and time challenges all of our thinking about locality and the logical sequencing of events. My point is not to fall into the false opposition between science and religion but to note the wonderful mystery of what Robinson calls the simple "*givenness of things*" which cannot be reduced to the instrumental calculations of our linear reasoning, to our mechanical or technocratic reason. Instead we are gathered by the poetic power of these words into the mystery of God upon whom all our thinking and our being depend. In other words, all the details of the story in all of their richness open us out to the deep truth of God and of God with us. Such is a kind of angelic sight, seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary things of the world and our lives.

As such Christmas might just awaken us to an appreciation of the simple "*givenness of things*." The simple "*givenness of things*" is about the truth of God in whom all things have their being and their meaning. The divine gift is the world given for thought and love.

Christianity, Hans Urs Von Balthasar notes, is about "*the fullness of images*" in contrast to classical Buddhism which is about "*the emptiness of images*." Nowhere is there a greater fullness of images than at Christmas and in the various ways, artistically and poetically, the story is presented. The challenge, of course, and one which Buddhism also teaches has to do with the problem of our attachment to things. There is always the danger of becoming too attached to one aspect or another of the Christmas story and miss its essential point. Yet in the Christian understanding each aspect of the story only has its truth in and through the essential mystery which is why I think having *John's* great *Prologue* and the thundering words of *Hebrews* read first at *Christmas* makes so much sense intellectually and spiritually. It grounds everything in God and gathers all our more linear thinking into the eternity of God's own being and thinking. That is a feature of redemption, a redemption of all the images both of Scripture itself and also of what belongs to holy imagination, even such as Lenny Gallant's intriguing carol, *The Innkeeper*.

The tondo presented on the back of the insert *Christmas at Christ Church* is a marvellous illustration of just that fullness of images which belongs to the thinking upon the mystery. Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi have gathered a host of images about the nativity into a round picture, a tondo. Called "*The Adoration of the Magi*," it presents the

idea of the whole world of men and animals coming to the humble scene of Christ's holy birth. Why? Because *Christmas* is about "*the grace of God that bringeth salvation which hath appeared to all men,*" as *The Epistle to Titus* explains. It is about the fundamental and underlying truth of God being with us, a kind of divine simplicity communicated through the rich diversities of our human lives. It challenges us like the Shepherds to see things in a new way; in short, to see with angel's sight.

And the angel of the Lord came upon them

Fr. David Curry

Christmas Morn, 2018

Blessed in he that cometh in the Name of the Lord

The three holy days of *Christmas* illumine wonderfully the great mystery of God with us. It is a blessed time but we easily misconstrue the nature of that blessedness. "*Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord,*" Jesus says in today's extraordinary Gospel. Extraordinary because it is a lament over Jerusalem, a lament about the folly and blindness and wickedness of our humanity, and yet, at the same time, a powerful witness to the very reality of sacrificial love. That is what blessing means here in terms of "*coming in the Name of the Lord.*"

"*Love is in the nature of a first gift through which all gifts are given,*" Aquinas notes. We live for the one who gives himself for us. *The Feast of St. Stephen* reminds us with great clarity about the real meaning and purpose of Christ's holy birth. He comes as *Saviour*. He comes as *the Lamb of God*. He comes as *sacrifice*. Such is the real and deep meaning of love. To come "*in the Name of the Lord*" is not to act in our own interest, in our own name. It is to bear witness to another; in short, to God in Christ. A martyr is essentially one who bears witness to the truth of God. In its extreme form that witness is even unto death.

St. Stephen is not only the first Christian martyr but the proto-martyr, the one who shows us the very pattern of witness and sacrifice which is really about nothing more than Christ living in us. Stephen, one of the early deacons of the early and emerging Church, shows us the nature of the diaconate, the nature of the ministry of service. It is about a witness to God in Christ even in the face of ridicule and animosity. He is stoned to death but prays in almost the exact words of Christ on the Cross. "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,*" he says even as Christ had prayed, "*Father, into thy hands, I commend my spirit.*" That last word from the Cross recalls Christ's first word from the Cross which shapes Stephen's last word. "*Lord, lay not this sin to their charge,*" echoing perfectly Christ's first word, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*"

The celebration of *The Feast of Stephen* on the day immediately after *Christmas* is no accident of time. Nothing emphasises more completely the deeper meaning and wonder of the *Christmas* mystery and its application to us in our lives. "*In his master's feet he trod,*" as the ancient medieval Carol, *Good King Wenceslas* puts it, and "*on the feast of Stephen*". Christ comes to us so that we may come to him. Our blessedness lies in our coming, in our doing and thinking all things "*in the Name of the Lord.*" This emphasizes yet again the radical meaning of *Christmas*. It is about the presence of God in our world now and always. It is about our witness to the truth that God is always God and always divinely like himself. Our good is found in him, in the one who comes, in the one who is Emmanuel, God with us.

Like St. Stephen, we seek the echoing of Christ's words of sacrificial love in us. That is the blessing, the deep blessing of *Christmas*.

Blessed in he that cometh in the Name of the Lord

Fr. David Curry

The Feast of St. Stephen, 2018

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you

The Feast of St. John the Evangelist complements powerfully the essential Christian mystery of the Incarnation expressed in *The Prologue of John's Gospel* on Christmas Eve. The reading from John's first letter underscores the essential insight into the Incarnation. It is written to emphasize the reality of God being with us in the incarnate reality of Jesus Christ. It counters what will become the earliest Christian heresy, *docetism*, which argues that God could not become flesh, could not engage the world intimately; he only appears to have done so but not really. As such it plays into all the forms of gnosticism, ancient and modern, which see the world in largely dualist terms: spirit, good; matter, evil.

Our own culture is riven with dualisms of this sort both politically and environmentally. We have, I think, the hardest time understanding and appreciating the essential goodness of everything in the created order and end up attributing to the goodness of creation an evil which actually belongs to us and to our "*thoughts, words and deeds*". How we use the created world is the real question. Christ's Incarnation is the strongest possible affirmation of the goodness of the world, of matter, of the flesh, of the body. But even more, the Incarnation is the strongest possible affirmation of the truth of God in whom the truth and being of all things radically depends.

The Gospel too complements the point of the Epistle. Not only is Christ's Incarnation and all that follows from it, such as the Resurrection, real and not merely an appearance, a kind of divine play-acting, as it were, but "*the world itself could not contain the books that should be written,*" John says, about the "*many other things which Jesus did.*" In other words, the Incarnation does not mean that God is collapsed into the world, rather the world is gathered into the radical truth of God. This affirms the goodness of the created order but only in relation to God.

Christ is "*God and Man,*" the creeds say, and that union contains a wonderful insight into God and to God with us. Christ, as the Athanasian Creed puts it, is "*God and Man, yet he is not two, but One Christ, One, however, not by conversion of Godhead into flesh, but by taking Manhood into God.*" Such an insight proclaims a deep truth that counters all the forms of our dualism. It is what *Christmas* proclaims and celebrates, the deep meaning of Emmanuel, God with us. John emphasizes in his Epistle what he shows in his Gospel. "*That which was from the beginning*" is the Word, "*the Word [which] was with God and was God,*" "*the Word [which] was made flesh*", the Word "*which we have heard, and seen, and looked upon and handled*". The Word of Life.

That Word "*we declare unto you*", John says, "*that you may have fellowship with us*" in "*our fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.*" This is our Christmas joy, and the fullness of joy. This is the light that overcomes all darkness. "*God is light and in him is no darkness at all.*" Such is the great and radical witness of the Christmas mystery. We celebrate the double mystery of God and of God with us only to realize that God with us is precisely the mystery of God himself.

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you

Fr. David Curry, St. John the Evangelist, 2018

These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth

There is, perhaps, no feast more troubling than *The Feast of the Holy Innocents*. Yet it belongs to the *Christmas* mystery and helps to illumine the deeper realities of God's intimate engagement with our world and our humanity in the child Christ.

The story simply shows us what is a continuing feature of our own world; the horrible sufferings and deaths of the little ones in so many parts of our world, the sufferings and deaths of the little ones because of war, the sufferings and deaths of the little ones because of what is expedient and useful for the interests of others. In other words, there are a myriad of innocent ones. Innocent simply means those who are not able to harm.

In the Christian story, the little ones of Bethlehem are destroyed by Herod in his attempt to get rid of a potential rival to his throne. The story, too, draws upon the Egyptian captivity of Israel and deliverance of Israel by God. The Hebrews are drawn out of Egypt and learn to be defined by the Law in the wilderness. So, too, Christ with Joseph and Mary flees Bethlehem and goes into Egypt from which he will return. *Fuga in Egyptum*, "*the Flight into Egypt*," as the Matthaean story is called, has excited the imaginations of the artists. The angel of the Lord alerts Joseph in a dream about the danger the young child and his mother are in. They flee into Egypt.

Meanwhile back in Bethlehem, we have the slaughter of all the little ones just because they are little ones. It is a policy of infanticide enacted for a political purpose. Sadly, there is nothing new in that: think about the horrors of the Rwandan genocide or the present horrors of the Syrian civil war, of the flood of refugees, etc., etc.

What is the point? What is there to celebrate? What are we celebrating? The meaningless and cruel deaths of little children? Cruel deaths, yes, but *The Feast of Holy Innocents* makes the strong theological claim that such deaths are not meaningless, that such deaths actually participate in Christ's coming, including his death. Their lives have their meaning entirely in Christ. It means, too, that the sufferings that arise so directly from human folly and wickedness in all its forms are known to and in God. The simple "*givenness of things*," to use Marilynne Robinson's phrase, embraces the suffering of all things, both gentle and violent. The suffering of all things belongs to the being of God.

The unspeakable grief of the mothers of the world at the loss of their little ones is part and parcel of the Christmas story, "*Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not*." The only comfort is found in the comfort of the Christmas story. God himself becomes a little one so that he might redeem all the little ones of the world. Without guile, in other words, innocent, "*they are without fault before the throne of God*."

Think about how poignant and powerful this story might be precisely for those who have lost little ones. I have had occasion in the priestly and pastoral ministry to deal with those who have lost a child at childbirth or shortly thereafter. What comfort can there be except to recall this feast which makes it clear that the little ones ultimately are those who "*follow the Lamb*," a reference to Christ in his sacrifice for us, "*whithersoever he*

goeth"? He goes ultimately to the Cross for us and for our salvation. The holy Innocents are "*they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth.*" There can be no other comfort.

Fr. David Curry
Holy Innocents, 2018

The birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise

This is how it happened? Well, at least in Matthew's account. But more importantly what Matthew and Luke and John offer us is a way to think about the meaning of Christ's Incarnation. We might say that how it happened and how we think about what happened are inescapably intertwined. In fact, we really don't have any other way to think about the mystery of Christmas than what we are presented with in the Gospels.

To be sure, there are the traditions of representation and reflection upon these mysteries that belong to our thinking. But what is most striking and most important about the mystery of Christ's Incarnation is the idea of God being with us which is simply another way of thinking about the radical nature of God as the principle upon which the being and the knowing of things utterly depends. From such a view, God is always with us. Christ's Incarnation is the instantiation of that idea simply in its most radical guise. No cause for Christian triumphalism however; only for humility and wonder.

Matthew's account complements John's outstanding theological vision more than it does Luke's economical and bare bones story which at face value has nothing really extraordinary about it other than that in the light of John's Christmas Gospel we are made aware that is what is extraordinary. The ordinariness of the extraordinary event, if you will. Matthew offers us an insight into something he shares with Luke. It has entirely do with angelic sight, the raising of our minds from the linear and divisive thinking of *ratio* to the unitive reasoning of *intellectus* into which everything is gathered together.

Matthew's account focuses wonderfully, I think, on the role of the angels in directing the conscience of Joseph. He confronts a conundrum, a social scandal. Espoused to Mary, yes, but lo, and behold, she is with child and not by him! Something of the character of Joseph is suggested to us in Matthew's equally laconic account, equal to Luke's concision. "*Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily,*" discreetly arrange for things, as it were, and not go viral on twitter in the manner of Trudeau and Trump. There is in Joseph's thoughts - something which we are allowed to see - a question, a sense of mystery, that has to do, perhaps, with his sense of the character of Mary. Simply put, he is perplexed about what exactly is going on. There are, to say the least, questions.

That is exactly what Matthew wants to emphasize. Joseph "*thinks on these things*" and in that moment of thinking, as Matthew puts it, "*the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream.*" The words of the angel open us out to the miracle of the extraordinary in the ordinary even though it has all of the makings of a twitter scandal. Joseph is made aware that "*that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost*". Okay, a relief of a sort - it is not some other guy, but what is he to make of "*conceived of the Holy Ghost*"? Well, the angel assists his thinking by saying first that she shall bring forth a Son, and that "thou," meaning Joseph, "*shalt call his name JESUS.*" As the text has come down to us,

the name Jesus is entirely in capital letters. A strong point is being made about the name Jesus. It signifies Saviour as is pointed out by way of another literary device, that of the parenthesis. Matthew obverts to a prophecy by Isaiah about the Virgin birth, (his word in Greek, I hasten to add parenthetically). The passage also brings to the fore the great Advent name for Jesus, Emmanuel. Everything hinges on that concept, the concept which catapults God with us into God himself.

Joseph did as the angel told him, Matthew tells us. How can we know this? Only through the witness of the Gospels, only through the way in which they speak about the great and awesome mystery of God. For that is what we behold. The awesome mystery of God himself through the mystery of his being with us. Our service of Christmas Lessons and Carols serves to draw us even more into the pageant of God being with us. It is all about how we think about that which happened. Our thinking, however, actually causes nothing to happen. God's thinking on the other hand, always does.

The birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise

Fr. David Curry

Sunday After Christmas, 2018

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

I hope that we are among those who having heard it, wonder at those things told to us by the shepherds. Even more, I hope and pray that we will be like Mary and *“keep all these things, and ponder them in [our] hearts.”* Such is, I think, the radical meaning of the Christmas of the Shepherds.

Things told to them by angels set them in motion to *“see this thing which is come to pass,”* they say, and with a proper theological sophistication of the kind which belongs to the little ones of the world, they know that this is something *“which the Lord hath made known unto us.”* They come and find it so. Splendid. Good on them but even better, even a greater good is that they do not keep this to themselves. It is not *“good tidings of great joy”*, just for themselves. No, it concerns us all. *“They made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.”* We know that saying. We heard it on Christmas morn. The *“good tidings of great joy”* is that *“unto you is born this day in the city of David, who is Christ the Lord.”* And as a sign of this truth, *“ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”*

All this has remained with them and belongs to their conversation among themselves. It sets them in motion, moved by more than what they or we can possibly conceive. They come and see and it is as they had been told. They wonder at what they behold and made it known abroad and others wonder too. But how many keep all these things and ponder them in their hearts? The shepherds *“returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”* There is the constant emphasis upon the idea of what has been told and seen and then told to others.

All of this belongs to the sweet wonder of the Christmas mystery. On *The Octave Day of Christmas* it all comes to a kind of crescendo, paradoxically enough not with the Angels nor with insight of John but with the lowliness and humility of the shepherds. They have the kind of rural honesty that used to be part of our communities. A way of simple directness and humble honesty. It is much needed in our age of smug arrogance and ignorant assertions. The Octave Day gathers up the fullness of images that Christmas presents and concentrates them on our thinking about Jesus, especially about his being named Jesus by angels, by Joseph, and now, wonderfully by Mary.

His naming appears in the context of the Jewish ritual of circumcision, itself a profound sign of identity with the God of all creation who cannot be reduced to the created order itself. His name is critical to the understanding of the *Christmas* mystery. It means Saviour; it implies sacrifice through the shedding of blood. The *Christmas* mystery unfolded throughout the Octave serves to bring out the radical nature of sacrificial love. There is blood in Bethlehem, the blood of Christ at his circumcision and the blood of the holy Innocents. These mysteries confront us with the greater mystery of God who uses the things of our world to open us out to his wonder and truth. But only because of the things that have been told us.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were
told them by the shepherds.

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The Octave Day of Christmas, 2018