Advent and Christmas

Sermons at Christ Church & Chapel Meditations

2019

Antonio Vivarini, Adoration of the Magi (c.1445/47)

(Fr. David Curry)

Then Jesus turned

This Sunday marks the turning of the year, a time of endings and beginnings. "To make an end," as T.S. Eliot observes, "is to make a beginning" for "the end is where we start from." He means an end in the sense of a first principle. *Metanoia* is repentance. It signals our turning back to the One from whom we have turned away. But literally, *metanoia* is 'a thinking after,' our thinking after the things of God. It is an axiom of thought that a first principle cannot be demonstrated by anything prior to it but rather by showing that everything after it is radically dependent upon it. This Sunday reminds us that our turning to God is entirely dependent upon God's turning to us.

In a way, it is about two kinds of intellectual or spiritual motion: a motion to and from a first principle, God. Both motions depend upon the absolute priority of God in his motion towards us and in him moving us back to himself. Advent marks the beginning of that first motion; the Trinity season signals the project of the second. The one focuses on what is properly referred to as justification; the second upon sanctification; in short, Christ for us and Christ in us. Together they belong to the dynamic of our incorporation into the life of God in Christ.

"From Advent through to Trinity Sunday," Dean Anthony Sparrow (1655) says, "we run through the Creed," through the principles that belong to human redemption as distilled and articulated in the classical Creeds of the Christian Faith. The Creeds themselves are the distillation of the essential teachings of the Scriptures about our life in faith. But "from Trinity Sunday through to Advent," he says, "the Creed runs through us." Both motions are interrelated: God's turning to us and our turning to God, his turning to us in revelation and his turning us back to himself; in short, the coming of God as Word to us and our abiding with that Word.

For centuries, this Sunday was called *The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity* but was also used and known by way of a rubric as *The Sunday Next Before Advent*. For regardless of the number of Sundays after Trinity, which varies from year to year owing to the date of Easter, the fifth Sunday before Christmas is always *The Sunday Next Before Advent*. And for centuries upon centuries, the Gospel reading on this day was John's account of the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness, a story which is also read on *The Fourth Sunday in Lent.* In each case it is read with a different purpose. Its theme on this Sunday was about the "gather[ing] up of the fragments that remain that nothing be lost" - a kind of reflection upon the nature of our spiritual progress throughout the Trinity Season - and about the miracle as sign that Jesus is "that Prophet that should come into the world," an Advent theme about the coming of Christ.

Perhaps because it is read in mid-Lent, the modern Canadian revision of 1962 changed the Gospel reading to what you heard this morning, again from John's Gospel, about the disciples of John following Jesus and Jesus turning to them. His turning marks the beginning of the possibilities of our turning to him, to our being with him and to the progress of his grace in us. "Come and see," Jesus says in relation to their question: "Rabbi, where dwellest thou?" That itself is a question in response to Jesus' first question which is

actually the first form of direct speech by Jesus in John's Gospel. The question speaks to our souls, "What seek ye?" What do we desire? Advent is about awakening our desire for God. It is about the stirring up of our wills in faith, to put it in the language of the Collect. Seeing and abiding with what we come to know are necessarily and intimately connected.

Our relation to God as the principle of our lives can never be static and passive. It is always about God active and alive for us and in us. Advent marks the beginning of the pageant of God's Word and Son coming to us. It is about our being awakened to that principle upon which our knowing and being radically depend. We come to the end of the Trinity season at once looking back and taking account of ourselves but also with a renewed sense of beginning again. We are enfolded in the mystery of God's love coming to us and moving in us, a mystery which is always more and greater than what we can measure.

Advent is the wonder of God's Word coming as light into the darkness of our world and day and into the darkness of our hearts. What is revealed to us is what is also to be known in us. Our own self-awakening depends utterly upon God's absolute self-consciousness. Such is God the Trinity in whom memory, understanding, and will are perfectly united, unlike in us, and utterly without confusion, again quite unlike us. The journey of our lives is about the discovery of ourselves as being made in God's image, thus the realization that our self-consciousness is utterly dependent upon that principle of divine self-consciousness. What is there for faith in the pageant of God's Word is there for our understanding and for our growth in understanding. "The end is where we start from." We begin and end with Christ who bids us "come and see," the one who gathers up the fragments of our broken lives that nothing be lost, that all be gathered back to him from whom all things come.

The last poem in George Herbert's remarkable collection of poems known as the Temple is "Love (III)". It captures beautifully the nature of this dynamic interplay between seeing and abiding with what we see, between justification and sanctification. It begins:

> Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
> Guiltie of dust and sinne.

Already there is a certain sense of self-awareness, the awareness of our shortcomings and failings which is only possible through an awareness, however incomplete, of God.

> But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
> From my first entrance in,
> Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
> If I lack'd any thing.

Jesus turns and asks the disciples, "what seek ye?" Love "drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning, / If I lack'd any thing." "A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:"

The soul's answer corresponds to the disciples in both Gospel stories in the recognition of a desire for something more than what we can acquire for ourselves. But "Love said, You

shall be he." We are invited to be guests at the banquet of divine love, but the soul replies, "I the unkinde, the ungrateful? Ah, my deare,/I cannot look on thee."

This is the soul's actual confession following upon its initial sense of contrition or sorrow in the awareness of the gap between what we are and what we seek. What next?

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Jesus turned, Jesus speaks, and asks about what we seek. There are things which God wants us to know. Love made us for himself and so for our entering into the knowledge of his love for us. Here in this most moving and profound image is the sweet gentleness of wisdom in God's turning to us to draw us to the truth of our being and our knowing. "Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,/ Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth Lord," the soul says in truth, " but I have marr'd them: let my shame/Go where it doth deserve." The soul remains conscious of its faults and failings but the turning of God to us in Jesus, in love, means something more than remaining simply in ourselves as "dust and sinne." Such things are less than what we are in God's sight. And so we are reminded of the principle of divine self-consciousness upon which our self-consciousness depends

And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?

Here is the principle of justification the pageant of which Advent inaugurates, showing us God's deep love for our humanity in the life of Christ, the incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended Lord. By his stripes we are healed. He bears our sins in himself in the body he takes from us to offer in himself what to offer unto God for us. This can only move the soul to the desire to serve. "My dear, then I will serve."

Our life is our service to God. Such is prayer. It is all the service that we ever do unto God. But God seeks something more for us than servitude. The whole pageant of redemption is about liberation. Jesus famously says, "ye are my friends" and no longer servants. There is something much more intimate.

You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

We are fed in the wilderness journey. Jesus bids the men sit down, in number above five thousand. The fragments that are gathered up are more than enough to sustain us. The divine intent is that "nothing be lost." A wonderful fragment from a lost play of Euripides says, "Never that which is shall die." The poem and the gospel readings on this day bid us "come and see" and "to sit and eat; " they are at once eucharistical and eschatological. The times of transition awaken us to the turnings of God to us and in us, to the radical nature of our life in Christ.

Then Jesus turned.

The Sunday Next Before Advent, 2019

Crossings

The Crossing of the Red Sea marks the culmination of the story of the Plagues and the Passover, which distinguishes the Israelites from the Egyptians, and inaugurates the wilderness journey so central to the Exodus and to the ethical education of the people of Israel. This week in Chapel students read and heard the story of the Crossing of the Red Sea and the provision of manna to the people of Israel in the wilderness. Both stories speak to the enterprise of education and its challenges.

The Passover story ends with the question which reverberates down throughout the ages, "what mean ye by this service?" It complements the greater question raised by Jesus that introduces the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. That greater question is "how readest thou?" How do you read? How do we read the story of the Crossing of the Red Sea? My point is that we easily mis-read it if we remove the story from the way in which the story has come down to us in the coming together of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole as well as the coming together of the Christian Scriptures. In other words, these stories belong to a rich and profound reflection about an ethical education, about the principle which defines and informs our lives with respect to what is good and right, to what is true and beautiful. The Exodus belongs to a tradition of ethical reflection.

Thus Philo of Alexandria, the great Jewish theologian writing at the time of Jesus, sees Moses in terms of Plato's Philosopher/King, as Lawgiver, and as Prophet. The stories of the Exodus are part of a moral and ethical education about how to think and live. It is about living towards and with a principle which by definition cannot be defined by anything prior to it but upon which all else depends. This counters the mistaken view of fundamentalist and atheist alike to read these stories in a literal manner and to attempt to explain them or to explain them away by reference to some sort of empirical phenomenon; in other words, to look for a naturalistic explanation, for example, the east wind, rather than recognising the theological point about God as beyond and above nature who uses the forces of nature for his will and purpose. This is the main point of the story of the Crossing of the Red Sea through which Israel is finally and completely freed, at least externally, from Egyptian domination. At issue is a clash of principles.

Even more, what is at issue is whether Israel herself gets the instruction. The story of the wilderness wanderings is as much about the *'kvetching'* (to use a good Yiddish word about our complaining) of the Hebrews as it is about God's providential provision of manna - bread - from heaven. The lessons of the Exodus are entirely about how our humanity might come to learn about the very principle upon which the being and the knowing of all things depend. That requires, initially and constantly, our being still and looking at God, a point which the story of the Crossing of the Red Sea amply demonstrates. The simple point made over and over again is that Israel is delivered by God's will and power and not by virtue of any human power considered in itself. All truth and power derives from God. The lessons of the Exodus are about how we begin to discover the truth of our humanity as grounded in our participation in the life of God. This was Philo's concern and one which he bequeathed to Christians and Muslims long after him. It also draws upon the rich

philosophical traditions of Plato and Aristotle and the dogmatic schools which followed them.

Crossings. We are all the products of various sorts of crossings of which the Crossing of the Red Sea provides a most powerful and explanatory metaphor. There is the crossing of the Bering Strait which led to the populating of the Americas with humans. There are the many different crossings of the Pacific to one extent or another. There are the crossings of the Atlantic in many different iterations which belong to the history of the Americas. There are the various crossings to Australia both pre-historic and more modern. There are the crossings of desert and jungle, of seas and rivers, of mountains and valleys, in Africa, India and China. There are the many crossings of the Mediterranean Sea which have shaped so much of the later cultures of the European West. In a way, all these crossings are like the equally proverbial crossing of the Rubicon. Once it is crossed there is no going back; at least not in the same way. The crossings that belong to the cultures of our world belong to the constant discovery of what belongs to our common humanity, to the possibilities of a deepening of our understanding.

Some of you have crossed many continents and many seas to come to King's-Edgehill. Others of you have simply had to cross the Avon River! Yet the historic culture of the Maritimes and of Canada, in general, is entirely about various kinds of crossings. The paradigmatic crossing is the Crossing of the Red Sea, a crossing which influences profoundly the Christian liturgy of the Easter Vigil and of Christian baptism, for instance. The greater crossings are always about our spiritual and intellectual education: the crossing over from ignorance to understanding, from sin to righteousness, from death to life. All belong to the themes of the Exodus, to the idea of education. It is all a kind of crossing.

It comes down to how we read. In the twelfth century, the remarkable and scholarly Hugh of St. Victor wrote his *Didascalicon: De studio Legendi*, a treatise on education. It is really on how to read. He points out that there are three things to be considered: what one ought to read; in what order one ought to read; and in what manner one ought to read. That is, I should think, at the heart of your learning, a crossing from ignorance to erudition and learning.

"God provides" is one of the strong lessons of the Scriptures but that provision has to be grasped and willed by us. We cannot be passive in relation to the truth. We are only able to be educated to the extent that we can encounter our faults and failings and not acquiesce to them but seek what is prior and primary; namely, the truth and goodness of God in whom all our good is found. Such is the exodus of the soul in the journey to God upon whom all our good depends. It is all about the crossings from ignorance to understanding. Such is education.

Chapel Reflections, King's-Edgehill School

The Gentleness of Wisdom

Advent Meditation 2019

Times of transition signal occasions for renewal. We come to the ending of the Church Year and so to the beginning of yet another. The times of endings return us to our beginnings. Advent marks a new beginning. But what does it mean, these endings which bring us back to our beginnings? What does it mean to begin again? Is the cycle of the Church Year another dreary round of *the same old things* in *the same old places* with *the same old faces*? Or is it the dance of God's grace and glory in human lives? *"To make an end is to make a beginning,"* T.S. Eliot observes for *"the end is where we start from."* It is about the principle of our lives.

We come to the end of a year of grace and take stock of our lives in the light of God's grace. It marks a kind of harvest-time for our souls, as it were, a gathering up of the fruits of the past year's grace in our lives. But it means too, that we are returned to our beginning, to Him who is the foundation and meaning of our lives. The grace is God's Word revealed and all because "Jesus turned." The turnings of the year and our turnings turn upon God's turning to us.

In the barren emptiness of nature's year, "when yellow leaves or none or few do hang/ upon those boughs which shake against the cold,/ bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang" (Shakespeare's Sonnet 73), Christ strides across the barren fields of humanity to gather us into the barn of his righteousness and truth. We are returned to him who is *"the Lord our Righteousness,"* our Judge and King, the Shepherd and the Healer of all mankind, the Alpha and the Omega of all creation. Our endings and our beginnings all meet in him. Basil the Great suggests what this means.

As all the fruits of the season come to us in their proper time,
flowers in spring, corn in summer and apples in autumn,
so the fruit for winter is talk.

Talk, you may protest, thank you very much, but we have had quite enough talk, too much talk, especially preachers' talk. But talk about what, you might ask? What is the talk in the times of endings, the fruit for winter's evening, the talk which marks the occasions for renewed beginnings? Surely, it is God's talk, God's Word and no other, God's Word making his talk in us. For apart from God's talk, our talk is vain and destructive. *"The tongue,"* as St. James notes, "*is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous member…With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God."* Such are our contradictions. "*From the same mouth come blessing and cursing."* As he says, "*My brethren, this ought not to be so."* But sadly it is, for "*no human being can tame the tongue."*

What then can be said either by us or about us? Not much. Yet what is wanted is that we and our words, our souls and our very being, should be brought under the wisdom and the Word of God, *"for both we and our words are in his hand,"* as *The Wisdom of Solomon* puts it. What is wanted is that his Word should take shape in us. *"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom."*

In the meekness of wisdom, *in mansuetudine sapientiae*, the *gentleness* of wisdom, really. It is a wonderful phrase which captures beautifully the point of Wisdom's prayer: *"May God grant that I speak with judgment and have thoughts worthy of what I have received."*

The gentleness of wisdom requires a certain disposition of soul, an attitude of mind. It requires an openness to that constant coming of God's Word to us, *"to that which we have received."* It challenges the arrogant assertions of our own petty 'wisdoms' and the follies of our complacencies. It brings us under the tutelage of God's word and wisdom. Only then may we say that *"both we and our words are in his hand."* Such is the gentleness of wisdom.

We come to an ending only to find that we have come to the beginning, to him who is the foundation of our lives, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*. We find all our endings and all our beginnings in the Father's Son and Word. We come simply to Christ. And surely, that is the truth of our Christian life. By his Word we have gained the threshold of heaven upon which we may sing and dance, upon which we may sit and talk. What more can we ever say than that? What can our talk be except his Word in us? Then we shall find that we *"have thoughts worthy of what [we] have received."* The fruit of our lives must be our talk of Christ, *"for both we and our words are in his hand."* That we can begin again is *"the gentleness of wisdom."* Begin again so that we might come to him who comes to us in the gentleness of wisdom hinted at in Charles G.D. Roberts' poem.

> When Mary the Mother kissed the Child
> And night on the wintry hills grew mild,
> And the strange star swung from the courts of air
> To serve at a manger with kings in prayer,
> Then did the day of the simple kin
> And the unregarded folk begin.
>
> When Mary the Mother forgot the pain,
> In the stable of rock began love's reign.
> When that new light on their grave eyes broke
> The oxen were glad and forgot their yoke;
> And the huddled sheep in the far hill fold
> Stirred in their sleep and felt no cold.
>
> When Mary the Mother gave of her breast
> To the poor inn's latest and lowliest guest, -
> The God born out of the woman's side, -
> The Babe of Heaven by Earth denied, -
> Then did the hurt ones cease to moan,
> And the long supplanted came to their own.
>
> When Mary the Mother felt faint hands
> Beat at her bosom with life's demands,

And nought to her were the kneeling kings,
The serving star and the half-seen wings,
Then there was the little of earth made great,
And the man came back to the God's estate.

Charles G.D. Roberts
From the Book of Roses, 1923

(revised 2019)

Love is the fulfilling of the law.

It is the great ethical insight of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic understanding albeit in different registers of expression. To put it another way, law is love. That is a challenging concept which requires some thought about both terms.

Advent awakens us to the deeper meaning of God's engagement with our humanity through the coming of God's Word to us. That idea belongs to revelation and to reason. There is the coming of God's Word to Moses on Mount Sinai in the thunderous words of the Law encapsulated profoundly in the Ten Commandments. There is the coming of God's Word in judgement in the powerful Gospel for the First Sunday in Advent with the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem on what Christians will later call Palm Sunday and which is here already associated with the ancient Jewish rites of the Passover. But even more, as Cranmer understood in the sixteenth century, that coming in judgement is seen most tellingly in the cleansing of the Temple, the passage which follows immediately in Matthew's Gospel upon the entrance into the city. Here is the wrath of Jesus and yet that wrath is really love, God's love of his own righteousness and truth without which there is no truth or righteousness.

Thus are we awakened to the *dies irae,* the day of judgment which is ever-present because truth is ever-present. The judgement is the coming of God's Word as light and truth into the darknesses of our world and our hearts. But this is actually love. Why and how? Because the coming of God to us is the goodness of God for us. And it is something known at once by revelation and by reason.

The Ten Commandments mark the climax of the ethical and educational journey of the *exodus.* The Book of Exodus is an ethical treatise that seeks to awaken us to a fundamental truth and principle upon which our thinking and living depend. The idea of God is not and cannot be simply a human construct - the assumption of every garden variety atheist. The wonder of the *exodus* is that God makes himself known as "*I Am Who I Am"* to Moses in the Burning Bush. In the exodus journey in the wilderness God reveals his will for our humanity in the thunderous words of the Ten Commandments. Allah is all but it is the will of Allah, of God, that defines Jew, and Christian, and Muslim alike. But that will, which itself is nothing less than the explicit expression of the goodness of God, is something that is also known through the exercise of reason in its discovery of that upon which our knowing and reason depend, a principle which cannot by definition be defined by anything prior to it but only by everything which depends upon it.

This is wonderful but not new. For centuries upon centuries and in different ways, the Law in its summary form and as the Ten Commandments has been known as the universal moral code for our humanity, something known at once as given authoritatively but also as given for thought. In our liturgy we regularly and perhaps complacently say the Summary of the Law. We rarely hear the Ten Commandments even though in the history of our own Anglican tradition, at least until the dominance of the 19th century Gothic revival, our churches in their seventeenth and eighteenth century architectural form as auditory chapels often had on the walls of the sanctuary "The Belief," the summary of the

Christian principles of the Faith; to wit, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostle's Creed. What do Christians essentially believe? There it is. We forget and neglect such things at our peril. We also misunderstand those principles when we reduce them to a set of propositions but that is another story about modern and post-modern narratives and their self-contradictions.

Because God is God, there can be no other Gods. The recognition of a First Principle is an intellectual necessity that belongs to reason itself as witnessed in various ways in the great philosophical and religious traditions of the world. The Ten Commandments are simply the unpacking of this First Principle, a logical explication of the Good, if you will, upon which depends the ordering of our souls and our lives in a community of souls. The Ten Commandments are not a list of 'maybe's'; nor are they a list of suggestions from which to pick and choose whatever happens to take your fancy and to reject what doesn't. They are a complete and interconnected set of principles that literally encompass and comprehend the whole of our humanity. As presented in the form of two tablets, they comprise what belongs to the nature of our relation to God and to one another; God and Man; God and neighbour. The Law is itself the expression of God's goodness in the articulation of what belongs to the truth and goodness of our humanity. There can be neither additions nor substractions from them.

Because God is God, God is not to be confused with anything in the created order. This too belongs to natural reason. The principle of our being and knowing cannot be identified and confused with what depends upon it; to invert the relationship between cause and effect, as it were, is to confuse Creator and created. The language of 'image' here is particularly important. The image is not the reality. And even in our image obsessed age, the simple point is that you are not your image, your picture, your selfie. This also relates to the discovery of our own self-consciousness as utterly dependent upon the divine self-consciousness in whose image we are made. God is the reality who is not to be confused with anything in the created order.

Because God is God, it logically follows that we are subject to God's will and not God to our wills and desires. That God has revealed himself in his 'name' as "*I Am Who I Am*" means that God's name is not to be taken "in vain"; invoking God's name for our ends and purposes and not honouring the principle itself. *Because God is God*, there is the sanctification of time. "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." Here we discover another feature of the essential goodness of the Commandments. They are not essentially negatives, a list of proscriptions, the 'thou shalt nots'. They are essentially positive in the sense that they show the nature of the relation to truth upon which every law and regulation of our lives depend. Such is the nature of an ethical principle.

The Ten Commandments are in this sense more than laws; they are the ethical precepts which shape and inform all law. They reveal that upon which all laws fundamentally depend. Here the idea of the Sabbath recalls us to creation itself and to God's own love and delight in that which he has made. We are called to share in that love and delight by keeping the Sabbath. Here is the great counter to our endless and mindless busyness.

This speaks as well to the nature of the interplay between the Commandments. "The fool has said in his heart there is no God," the psalmist notes (Ps. 14.1). Anselm, in his famous ontological argument for the necessary existence of God, interprets that passage to mean that the fool is preoccupied with the world and its busyness and in that sense is radically unthoughtful, hence a fool. The Sabbath is about our resting in the truth of God, our mindfulness of God, as it were.

The Commandments then turn from our direct relation to God in himself to our relations with one another as grounded in God. *Because God is God*, "thou shalt honour thy father and thy mother." Notice, yet again that this is a positive commandment and notice too that like the Sabbath commandment it recalls us to creation. Here we are taught to recognise our natural derivations, our parents and family. This is something over which we have no control except the fundamental freedom to honour the life which has been given to us. We are all the children of parents regardless of how we might feel about them. The Ten Commandments begin with the recognition that "the Lord God has brought us out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." As such all of the commandments signify our freedom, our freedom to will the truth.

Because God is God, "thou shalt not kill." This too builds on the same idea of God as source and principle of all life, not us. In acknowledging this we recognise that just as we are not the authors of our own being, either directly or indirectly, then we have no right to take the life of another or of ourselves. *Because God is God*, "thou shalt not commit adultery"; this also belongs to the same logic of creation. Marriage is the basis of the family, "instituted in the time of man's innocency" as the Prayer Book puts it, recalling us to creation and to God's purpose for our creation. This, too, is something universal even given the different practices about marriage in terms of polygamy, monogamy, and questions about divorce in various cultures.

Because God is God, "thou shalt not steal." Property is an extension of personality. Theft is a violation of the personal, a denial of the distinction between mine and thine which is a denial of the other and an assertion of oneself and one's self-interest over and against others. *Because God is God*, "thou shalt not bear false witness." Our tongues are meant to be connected to our reason; they are for speaking truth not lies. A lie is a self-contradiction because every lie depends utterly upon the truth. All the Commandments speak to some form of self-contradiction by our reason.

Because God is God, "thou shalt not covet," that is to say, to desire for oneself what another has. Here we discover the spiritual force and intellectual truth of the Commandments. They speak not only to our outward relations with one another but to our hearts, to what is inward; what we desire is hidden within us. This commandment at once convicts us, as Paul realizes, but also recalls us to the principle upon which our desiring depends, namely, the goodness of God. As the great ethical traditions argue, you can only desire what is good. You can, of course, be ignorant and mistaken about the Good. This commandment returns us to the beginning, to God as the principle of the whole of our lives, to what is known in the soul and mind of our very being.

To be reminded in these explicit ways of this perfect and complete system of thought is God's goodness towards us. The Law *is* love and so Paul in the epistle reading rightly argues that "love is the fulfilling of the law." He does so largely by reference to the love of neighbour but the point is that all love depends upon God. Love of God and love of neighbour are inextricably bound together just as self-knowledge and the knowledge of God are inextricably connected.

It is on the basis of the logic of the Commandments that we can understand the 'wrath' or 'anger' of Christ at our misuse and abuse of the things that have been given to us, particularly in the case of the Gospel, our misuse of the temple, of the holy places as places of teaching. We neglect and deny the real purpose of our churches when we allow our worldly and economic concerns to dominate and define us. There has to be a "casting out" of such things in our souls in order to be recalled to who we are in the sight of God. Such is the way of God's love; it is simply about recalling us to truth.

Advent is about the coming of God's Word as light and truth, thus it marks the way of illumination and the way of purgation and points us to the way of union and perfection which is ultimately realized in the intimacy of the Word made flesh who dwells among us. Here in our liturgy, law is love and love is the fulfilling of the law, the law of our life with God and with one another.

Love is the fulfilling of the law.

Advent 1, 2019

Be it unto me according to thy word

The readings in Chapel in this last week of classes help to prepare us for the pageant of Word and Song in the Advent/Christmas Services of Lessons and Carols on Sunday and as well for next week's exams. The lesson from John's Gospel (Jn. 4. 46-53) in particular highlights an important feature of education. It is the idea of resonance, the sounding forth within us of the words coming towards us whether in Chapel, in the classroom, in the venues of sports or in our social interactions. In the teaching environment, you are taught various things, but what have you learned? What have you taken into yourself and made a part of you? Exams provide some indication.
"The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,/ Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils/…. Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music," Lorenzo says in a famous passage about the power of music in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. It is very much about what moves within us. In the play, the idea of musical harmony relates to the themes of justice and mercy, to what has resonance within us.

In John's Gospel, an Official comes to Jesus in Capernaum seeking the healing of his son who is at the point of death. He beseeches Jesus to come down, to make a house call, as it were, to which Jesus replies in a kind of general criticism of human expectations which is really about our attempt to make God subject to us. "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe," he says. The Official repeats his request to which Jesus then says, "Go thy way; thy son liveth." The wonder of the story is captured in John's simple phrase. "The man believed the word that Jesus spoke unto him and he went his way." Christ's word has resonance within him. In going down to his house, his servants meet him to tell him that his son lives. He learns that he was healed in the self-same hour that Jesus said, "Thy son liveth." Truth has its resonance in us.

The Word of God of itself cannot be constrained to the ordinary limits of time and space as we saw last week both in the pageant of the Ten Commandments, as the universal ethical code of our humanity and as known by natural reason, and in the marvel of the Centurion's "speak the word only." At issue is the resonance of God's Word in us. It is about what we have learned, about instruction alive and living in us. *Catechism* means instruction by means of question and answer. The word points to the echo effect that is the resonance of the teaching in us, a sounding forth of what has been received and grasped.

Perhaps nowhere does that idea reach its highest expression than in the figure of Mary, whom orthodox Christians call the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Mother of God, the *Theotokos* or God-bearer, to use the celebrated term that emerges in the thought of Eastern Orthodoxy and which reverberates and resounds in the Christian West. She is the source of Christ's pure humanity essential to the idea of the Incarnation of God.

The Annunciation story read in the last two Chapel services of the term provides a fitting end to our intellectual journeyings and serves to catapult us into the wonder of the Advent/Christmas Services of Lessons and Carols. The Carol services are nothing less than the pageant of God's Word coming to us as light in a dark world; all the more so, when we recall that the service was inaugurated in December 1918, over one hundred years ago,

after the terrifying and heart-rending devastations of the First World War. How powerful and moving to hear this pageant of Word and Song signaling hope and peace, grace and redemption just after the "collective madness" of the world, to use Robertson Davies apt phrase about both the First and Second World Wars.

With Mary, the resonance of the Word in her takes on an even greater meaning. It is the resonance of God's Word *in mente* and *in carne*, in mind and in flesh. The Annunciation marks the conception of Christ in the womb of Mary, the beginning of his incarnate life made manifest in his holy birth at Bethlehem in the Christmas mystery. Mary's 'yes' to God belongs to that possibility and its reality. Note that she hears. Note that she questions. Note that she commits. Her words become the resoudning and defining mantra of the Church and of every human soul in relation to the principle of all life and being. It can only be what Mary says. "Be it unto me according to thy word."

In Mary the resonance of God's Word in us achieves its highest expression. It is about living what we hear and receive, about giving birth to that Word in us because of its resonance in our lives. Such is the joy and the peace of Christmas not only in its Christian sense but in the way it challenges us about the constant coming and eternal presence of God's Word and Truth with us. Will that Word and Truth have its resonance in us? Such is the hope and prayer of any education worthy of the name signaled for all of us in the pageant of God's Word coming to us in the mystery and the wonder of the Carol Services.

May God's Word have its resonance in all of you this Christmastide.

Chapel Reflections, King's-Edgehill School

Written for our learning

Truth is judgement. A central feature of the Advent season is God's coming *in judicio*, in judgement. God's Word coming to us is truth as judgment. How does that Word come to us? By what is spoken and hear, by what is written and read . What does it mean for that Word to be *learned*? There is teaching but what about learning? The real meaning of learning is captured most profoundly in Mary's response to the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation: "be it unto me according to thy word."

Her word is the resounding and defining mantra of the Christian Faith. God's Word is "a lantern ... and a light" unto our lives as the Psalmist puts it (Ps. 119. 105), but only through its resonance in us. That resonance requires that we be attuned to that Word, as Archbishop Rowan Williams suggests, for in that *attunement* lies our *atonement*, our being at one with what is spoken and heard, with what is written and read.

Mary is the outstanding figure of the spiritual landscape of Advent. It is instructive to consider her role in relation to the spiritual emphasis on the parade of Scripture on this day which is sometimes known as 'Bible Sunday.' "Whatsoever things were written aforetime" Paul tells us, indicating the purpose of the Scriptures. They "were written for our learning." This is wonderfully encapsulated in today's Collect in Cranmer's rich phrases, "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." It means paying attention to that word coming in judgement as the Gospel shows: "look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh." Mary is the supreme example of what it means to attend and be attuned to God's Word, to what it means to learn the Scriptures; in short, to be defined by the Word of God *in mente* and *in carne*, in mind and in flesh for both are *in judicio*, in judgement, too.

All teaching seeks the embodiment of what is taught. It is about ideas living in us, taking flesh in our lives, as it were. Mary hears. Mary questions, Mary commits. Her great 'yes' to God is essential to the Incarnation of Christ. The Word takes flesh in her and from her to be the Word made flesh, the incarnate Christ. She embodies the highest expression of what it means to be human. We are called to be good Marians, to be like Mary in her active acquiescence to the power and truth of God; in short, to let God's Word written and proclaimed resound in us.

December 8th commemorates "the conception of Mary"(BCP, p. xii). That is, of course, eclipsed this year by virtue of its falling on a Sunday in Advent. Yet the paradox is too great and too wonderful to be ignored; the paradox of Marian commemorations and the parade of Scriptural revelation.

The conception of Mary is not based on any biblical story exactly; at best it is extrapolated from the Wisdom literature, for "Wisdom hath built herself a house." Mary is the *habitaculum dei,* the little house of God, the one in whom the Word was made flesh and, literally, 'tented among us', "dwelt among us." The same is true for her nativity and her death or assumption, all of which are commemorated in our Anglican spiritual tradition. None of these commemorations have any explicit scriptural basis and so cannot be

mandated as *de fides*, required to be believed as essential faith. And yet they belong to a profound reflection upon the essential principles of the Christian faith and to a deeper understanding of Mary's role in the economy of salvation. She is the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, as orthodox Christianity, both East and West, recognises, proclaims, and celebrates in the liturgy and in the Creeds. Christ is "incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary." God is made man through Mary.

She is the chosen vessel through whom God becomes man. Christ's pure and true humanity is derived from her. She is, we might say, the embodiment of what it means to be attuned to God without which we cannot be at one with God and so most truly and completely ourselves. In Mary, we see the true worth and dignity of our humanity, at least in the eyes of God. But then, what else matters?

It comes down to the nature of our engagement with God's Word coming to us. That Word comes to her on angel's wings: "Hail Mary," Gabriel says to her, "Thou that art highly favoured." And that word comes to us literally by being written down. In being written and proclaimed, that Word is *taught* to us so that it may be *learned* by us, that we may be like Mary, allowing ourselves to be defined by God's Word.
The desire is that God's Word may be conceived in us and come to birth in our lives of faith and service. This requires our active acquiescence to the Word and Will of God, our openness and sacrificial commitment to God in Christ. "Mary," as Luther wonderfully puts it, "does not want us to come to her but through her to Christ" even as Christ has come to us through her. Luther's view complements Ignatius of Loyola's *per Mariam ad Jesum*, through Mary to Jesus, a maxim of counter-reformation catholicism as well as reformed catholicism.

The Common Prayer tradition retained a number of Marian commemorations including "the conception of Mary" but without the adjective "immaculate." The point regardless is about Mary as the pure and true source of our Lord's humanity; achieved by grace in some way or other on which point the Scriptures are silent. The simple but profound point is about God with us and about the resonance of God's Word in us.

George Herbert, in a wonderful poem on Prayer, provides a wonderful collection of images drawn from Scripture, from nature, from history, and from culture. Among them is the image of prayer as "a kind of tune, which all things hear and fear." Mary shows us what it means to be in tune with God's Word, letting it have its resonance in her for our joy and blessedness, for our being at one with God in Jesus Christ.

The Advent/Christmas Services of Lessons and Carols this afternoon and evening are about the coming of God's Word in the hope and prayer that word will have its resonance in our lives. God's Word is "written for our learning" in the hope that it will live in us. But only if we are alive to that Word and attuned to it, awakened to truth in judgement. For such is our joy and our hope, our peace and our redemption, as the readings for this day amply reveal. All because of words "written for our learning"

Advent 2, 2019

Light in darkness

The last lesson in the Advent/Christmas Service of Nine Lessons and Carols is the beginning of John's Gospel (Jn. 1.1-14), known as the Prologue (though technically it ends at verse 18). This year, too, our Carol Services on Sunday, December 8th, came at the end of the last week of classes. With the Prologue, we end where we began back in September at the first Chapel Services. "To make an end," as T.S. Eliot observes, "is to make a beginning" for "the end is where we start from." He means an end in the sense of a first principle as that upon which the being and the knowing of all things depends.

The lesson from John is the great Christmas Gospel that shapes a whole way of understanding about the nature of God's engagement with our humanity. It speaks profoundly to the darkness of our world and day about the light which is greater than the darkness. "And the darkness comprehended it not" as the King James' Version puts it, signalling precisely the intellectual aspect of light, as if to say that the darkness is not able to understand the light. The light understands the darkness but the darkness does not understand the light. The darkness in this sense is the absence of light, a negative.
The reading from John is also known as the last Gospel referring to a medieval practice whereby it is read, often silently, at the end of the Mass. Such practices underscore the significance of the Prologue of John's Gospel for our understanding.

It opens us out to the idea of an intellectual principle as that upon which everything depends in spite of our uncertainties and fears, our anxieties and worries. John is speaking about Jesus Christ entirely in terms of Word, Light, and Son, yet Jesus is not even mentioned by name in John 1.1-14. Word and Light in relation to the idea of God are intellectual and spiritual commonplaces with respect to a number of religious and philosophical traditions. Augustine will note that he learned the "Word" which was "in the beginning," which "was with God," and which "was God" from the *libri platonici*, the books of the Platonists. Word that is light in the darkness of ignorance and evil is not a concept unique to the Christian religion.

How that Word lives in us belongs to the Christian insight of the Word made flesh, the principle of the Incarnation, one of the essential mysteries of the Christian faith. Yet that mystery speaks to the various ways in which cultures and peoples attempt to understand themselves in relation to a first principle, to the various ways in which that principle may be realized in human lives; in short, to the way in which it lives in us. There can't be life or knowledge without the principle of life and light. "The life was the light of men," John tells us. This testifies to an insistence on the primacy of ideas, to the significance of the Light which is greater than all and every form of darkness.

That principle is ever-present as that from which we go forth and to which we return, a kind of circling around. Such is the deeper meanings of our endings and beginnings. We are returned to that from which we start but only so as to know our beginning for the first time. At the outset of the Four Quartets, Eliot quotes a fragment from Heraclitus that "the way upward and the way downward are the same." The only difference lies in the possibility of a deepening of our understanding, to know the beginning for the first time.

"And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/And to know the place for the first time" (Little Gidding).

This is the light that shineth in darkness. We are awakened to the primacy of ourselves as rational and intellectual creatures and to the way in which the light of knowledge lives in us. We engage with the God who engages with us as Word, and Light, and Son. That engagement is about our "behold[ing] the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Such is the light of life and understanding, the light which "shineth in darkness." Any education worthy of the name seeks to enfold students in the light of understanding, an understanding of themselves and others which is ultimately grounded in the light of God.

A blessed Christmas 'reading' break to all.

Chapel Reflections, King's-Edgehill School

Advent Psalms and Antiphons

Advent Programme 2019

Part One:

Advent is the season of anticipation, of an awakening to God as Word and Light coming to us in the darkness of the year and in the darkness of our souls. In a way it is a wonderful pageant or parade of Word and Song which is intended to awaken us and to enfold us in the power and wonder of the Divine Word coming to us and ultimately dwelling with us in the intimacy of Christ's incarnation, literally "the Word made flesh". The word 'advent' means the 'coming towards' us, *ad venio*, of God and thus to his being with us. "O come, O come, Emmanuel".

The Psalms are a critical feature of our liturgy and hymnody. And there are as well the various Antiphons, scriptural sentences, that are used with purpose to highlight certain seasonal themes, most poignantly, it seems to me in what are known as the Great 'O' Antiphons of Advent used with the Magnificat at Evening Prayer from December 16th to the 23rd, originally omitting St. Thomas' Day on the 21st and adding later "*O Virgo Virginum*". The Advent Antiphons anticipate with increasing intensity and expectation the meaning of Christ's coming as the Babe of Bethlehem and the Crucified Lord of Calvary, as God and Man, as Lord and Saviour. They draw upon a rich range of imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures just as the Psalms, themselves a digest of the Hebrew Scriptures, are used to deepen our understanding of our life in Christ in the liturgy.

The Psalms of David are the Prayer Book and Hymnal of both Jews and Christians alike. Classified in the Jewish understanding as one of the Writings, as distinct from the Law and the Prophets, the Psalms embrace a wide range of poetic forms of expression. The Psalter serves as a way of praying the Scriptures. The Antiphons serve as an interpretive matrix for our reading and understanding of the Scriptures and the liturgical canticles, particularly, the Magnificat, as bracketed by the "O" Antiphons in Advent.

Among the many treatises of Augustine, one of the most instructive devotionally is his Enarrations or Expositions on the Book of Psalms. For the English reader, it was only translated in the 19th century as part of the project of recovering the Patristic heritage of the Church, an interest both in England and on the continent. E.B. Pusey, one of the outstanding figures of the Oxford Movement, provided in December of 1857 an advertisement for the translation into English of Augustine's work on the Psalms. As he remarks,

> St. Augustin was so impressed with the sense of the depth of Holy Scripture, that when it seems to him, on the surface, plainest, then he is the more assured of its hidden depth. True to this belief, St. Augustin pressed out word by word of Holy Scripture, and that, always in dependence on the inward teaching of God the Holy Ghost who wrote it, until he had extracted some fullness of meaning from it. More also, perhaps, than any other work of St. Augustin, this commentary abounds in those condensed statements of doctrinal and practical

> truth which are so instructive, because at once so comprehensive and so accurate.

This doctrinal and practical sensibility about the Psalms means that they are read in the light of a certain theology of Revelation. They are not read as a mine of historical information and they are not read 'critically' as that term has come to be used by the schools of biblical and historical criticism, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They are read with a certain insight into the nature of scriptural revelation philosophically considered. In Augustine's case, they are read from a Christian perspective as bearing constant testimony to Jesus as the fulfilling of the Law and as divine Truth present with us.

What this means is an emphasis on a multi-layered approach to the reading of the Psalms: allegorical, moral, and mystical. It means a way of reading the Psalms that identifies different voices: the voice of Christ, the voice of the human soul, the voice of the Church. As Augustine remarks on Psalm 139: *"Our Lord Jesus Christ speaketh in the Prophets, sometimes in His own Name, sometimes in ours, because He maketh himself one with us."* The Psalms are seen through the lenses of the doctrine of the Incarnation and with constant reference to the doctrine of the Trinity and to various aspects of the doctrine of Redemption, particularly, the passion and resurrection of Christ.

The Christian Church inherited the Psalms and their use in prayer and praise from the Jewish Synagogue but saw in them the figure of Christ as the fulfillment of the Jewish hopes and expectations and sensibilities about the Law, the Torah. As such the use of the Psalms in the early Church is really part and parcel of the development of Christian doctrine but in a critical relation to the developments within late Judaism.

The task of defining and working out the nature of Christian doctrine was the great achievement of the Patristic Period. Augustine is a seminal figure with respect to that accomplishment. His treatment of the Psalms is a kind of summing up of much of the Patristic development, particularly in its Western and Latin expressions.

The treatment of the Psalms belongs to Augustine's life and work as a preacher and pastor, to his teaching ministry, as it were. Contained in his reflections on the Psalms is a form of doctrine in devotion. As Pusey suggests, *"the condensed statements of doctrinal and practical truth"* that his commentary presents is *"so instructive, because at once so comprehensive and so accurate,"* accurate that is to say within the interpretative framework of credal doctrine. Almost all of the Enarrations were sermons and they have that sense of immediacy and topicality. In Augustine's view, they all speak of God and Christ, of Christ and the Soul, and of Christ and the Church.

Among the Psalms that are used liturgically in the Church during the season of Advent is Psalm 80. This is, I think, the only Psalm that Augustine explicitly calls a Song of the Advent. *"The song here is of the Advent of the Lord and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of His vineyard,"* an image of the Church. A few selections from his commentary on this Psalm give a sense for his voice and for the flavor of his argument about praying the Psalms.

Augustine used, for the most part, the Old Latin version of the Psalter which had been translated from the Greek Septuagint. At the same time, Jerome was translating from the Hebrew as well. Jerome's translations of the Psalms from the Greek Septuagint and the Hebrew would both remain in use in the Latin West. A feature of the version Augustine used were interpretative titles to the Psalms to which Augustine often referred in his exegesis. Psalm 80 in his version is titled: "*For the end in behalf of them that shall be changed,*" to which Augustine adds, "*for the better.*" For, as he says, "*Christ, the end of the Law, hath come on purpose that He should change men for the better.*" This Psalm "*confess[es] both Christ and the vineyard; that is, Head and Body, King and people, Shepherd and flock, and the entire mystery of all Scriptures, Christ and the Church.*"

Commenting on the first verse, "*Thou that feedest Israel, hearken, Thou that conducteth [leadeth] Joseph like sheep,*" and "*thou that sittest upon the Cherubin,*" he remarks on the name Joseph which as he says "*signifieth increase*" and on the Cherubin, one of the order of Angels, as "*the seat of the glory of God and is interpreted as the fullness of knowledge.*"

> There God sits in the fullness of knowledge. Though we understand the Cherubin to be the exalted powers and virtues of the heavens: yet, if you will, you will be Cherubin. For if Cherubin is the seat of God, hear what the Scripture says: "*The soul of a just man is the seat of wisdom.*" How, you say, shall I be the fullness of knowledge? Who shall fulfill this? You have the means of fulfilling it: "*The fullness of the Law is love.*" Do not run after many things, and strain yourself. The amplitude of the branches terrifies you: hold by the root, and of the greatness of the tree think not. Be there in you love, and the fullness of knowledge must follow. For what does he not know that knows love? Inasmuch as it hath been said, "*God is love.*"

He speaks about those twin qualities of love and knowledge as belonging to what the Advent of Christ brings to our humanity, namely, the perfection of those divine qualities in us. "*O God, convert us,*" as Augustine's psalter puts it. In the Latin, that turning is, of course, conversion, our being turned to God in whom we find the fullness of knowledge and love. As he observes, "*For averse we have been from Thee, and except Thou convert us, we shall not be converted.*" By God's turning to us and looking upon us, we shall be turned and made whole. Advent is about our turning to God because God has turned to us in Jesus Christ. Augustine's commentary shows us something of the dynamic of prayer as doctrine in devotion by way of the stirring of hearts and the enlightening of minds.

Part Two:

Along with the Psalms, the Great 'O' Antiphons of Advent, the Advent Prose, and the wonderful 12th century Advent carol, *Veni Emmanuel*, which itself is a commentary on the Great 'O' Antiphons, contribute to the preparatory and anticipatory nature of the Advent season and its doctrinal significance. The Antiphons in particular illustrate the ways in which Scripture is used liturgically, credally, and devotionally; in short, a way of praying the Scriptures as the living Word of God coming to us as Light and Grace. The Antiphons

themselves are all drawn from various scriptural passages that are seen as contributing to an understanding of Christ.

The classical Prayer Book calendar retained not only a number of non-biblical Marian feast days but also other devotional and doctrinal traditions such as the Great 'O' Antiphons whose origins are probably eighth century. In the Prayer Book, December 16th designates "*O Sapientia*" for commemoration and in so doing points us to the whole tradition of the Great 'O' Antiphons. It is a curious but an arresting and intriguing feature of the Common Prayer tradition. Our 1962 Canadian Prayer Book adds as explanation: "An ancient Advent anthem for commemoration." Not a saint. Not a biblical event, but a clear reference to a doctrinal and devotional practice that belongs to the rich and varied forms of medieval liturgy, in this case, most likely drawn from the Sarum Rite.

The first of the 'O' Antiphons derives from the apocryphal book of Jesu ben Sirach or *Ecclesiasticus.* It is one of the books which belong to the category of Wisdom literature. The Antiphon begins with an almost direct quote from Wisdom about Wisdom having "come out of the mouth of the most high" as well as the famous passage from the Wisdom of Solomon about wisdom "reaching from one end to another mightily: and sweetly doth she order all things." It is an important passage in the literature of consolation, for instance, in Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy.

Each of the Antiphons invokes Christ by way of certain Scriptural attributes: Wisdom; Lord; Root of Jesse; Key of David; Dawning brightness or dayspring of light; King of Nations; and, of course, Emmanuel. They are all terms attributed to God and to Christ in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

As with all of the Antiphons, except "*O Virgo Virginum*", they end with the invocation, "Come" in which those attributes of divinity are applied to us. For example in the "*O Sapientia*," after rehearsing the Scriptural references to *Ecclesiasticus* and Wisdom, the invocation is for Christ as Wisdom to "Come and teach us the way of prudence." Prudence is one of the four classical virtues and refers to practical wisdom. The Antiphons seek the application of these divine attributes to us in the pilgrimage of Advent.

The second Great 'O' Antiphon draws upon the Greek word, *Adonai*, meaning Lord but in reference to Christ as Lord with the remarkable and strong association with the story of the Burning Bush where God reveals himself to Moses as "I am Who I am." In John's Gospel, the so-called seven "I am" sayings of Jesus intend to make that same connection between Christ and God and to the pageant of redemption. The references are from Exodus and from John.

The third Antiphon invokes the story of David, the son of Jesse, and to Isaiah's prophecy about a saviour king coming out of the Davidic lineage understood to be fulfilled in Jesus' human or family line. The biblical passages that inform the Antiphon are drawn from Isaiah and The Book of The Revelation of St. John the Divine.. The fourth Antiphon also draws explicitly upon Isaiah and Revelation in the image of Christ as the Key of David, the

one who unlocks the door to the kingdom and liberates those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, another powerful image from Isaiah.

The fifth Antiphon picks up directly on the theme of light that has been assumed in the previous Antiphons: Wisdom as light; Lord as revealed in the burning bush, a flame of fire; Root of Jesse as an ensign of the people; Key of David unlocking the prisoners from the prison-house of darkness and bringing them into the light. Here Christ is spoken of as the Sun and Light, whose coming is enlightenment, referencing again Isaiah's prophecy about liberation from sin and darkness.

The sixth Antiphon speaks of Christ more universally as the King of Nations and the Desire of Nations, meaning all peoples, a theme taken from the prophet Haggai but married to the idea of Christ as the Cornerstone upon whom the Church as body and temple depends.

The seventh Antiphon, traditionally the last, invokes Jesus Christ as Emmanuel drawing upon Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 7.14 as well as building upon the previous Antiphon. It alludes as well to Matthew's explication of Isaiah's use of the name Emmanuel, "which being interpreted is, God with us." Thus the Antiphons provide a rich and thoughtful reflection upon the truth of God coming to us through the witness of the Scriptures to Christ as the one in whom all these images find the fulness of meaning.

The eighth Great 'O' Antiphon is a later addition, a reminder to us of the rather fluid character of medieval liturgical practices which varied from place to place. It serves, however, as a wonderful testament to the underlying theme of Advent about the coming of God to us in Jesus Christ through the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is about the gathering up of all these images into the unity of Christ as Emmanuel, God with us who is essentially God with God. "This thing which ye behold," the Antiphon proclaims, "is divine." "That holy thing which shall be born of thee," as the Angel Gabriel says to Mary at the Annunciation, "shall be called the Son of God."

The sense of anticipation and indeed the heightening of anticipation is also signalled in the conceit that the Antiphons in their reverse order starting with *"O Emmanuel"* form an acrostic, ERO CRAS meaning "I will be there tomorrow," even as the Antiphons bring us to Christmas Eve and so to Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Psalms & Antiphons of Advent, 2019

Art thou he that should come or do we look for another?

John the Baptist and Mary the Blessed Virgin are essential figures in the spiritual landscape of Advent. They meet together, as it were, on the Third Sunday in Advent and illumine the nature of what it means to be "the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." They do so through the conjunction of repentance and rejoicing.

What is the ministry of John the Baptist? It is the ministry of "preaching a gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," as Mark and Luke tell us and to which Matthew also alludes. What does that mean? It means a form of self-awareness, an awareness of our faults and failings which is predicated upon the desire for wholeness or righteousness in us; in short, for truth. It complements Mary's *fiat mihi* which is about being defined by the Word of God's truth coming to her and through her to us. Repentance leads to joy, to the note of rejoicing signalled on this Sunday which is also known as "*Gaudete*" Sunday from the Introit taken from Philippians (and which also is the Epistle for next Sunday) and symbolised with the rose candle on the Advent wreath. "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice." And why? Because "the Lord is at hand."

But why is John in prison? Matthew only tells us several chapters later. He dared to speak truth to power. There is a confusion of Herods in the New Testament, all part of the Herodian dynasty, all related to Herod the Great of the Christmas story. Herodias was first the wife of Philip, also a Herod, but divorced him to marry his more powerful brother, Herod Antipas, who in turn divorced his wife to marry her. Herodias' name is itself a feminine form of Herod. She was a Jewish princess with great ambitions but marrying Herod Antipas, whom Matthew calls, somewhat confusingly, Herod the Tetrarch, caused an outrage since it was a violation of Jewish law for a man to marry his brother's divorced wife. As Matthew tells us, it was John the Baptist who said to him "It is not lawful for you to have her," and so he was put in prison.

This leads to the famous story of the beheading of John the Baptist through the connivance of Herodias and her daughter Salome. Salome dances so pleasingly before Herod Antipas that he promised to give her whatever she wanted. Herodias prompts her to say, "the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The story has captured the imagination of many artists such as Caravaggio, Titian, and Artemisia Gentileschi, to name but a few. The phrase "one's head on a platter" has become an idiomatic and hyperbolic expression for a very harsh punishment. Indeed. Obviously there is nothing new about our contemporary questions about "constitutional legitimacy" (quoting Habermas) or about ethical corruption in what Maclean's calls our disordered world.

But here in today's Gospel we have the strongest possible affirmation of the ministry of John the Baptist and its significance for us in the pilgrimage of Advent. John sends two of his disciples to Jesus with the question, "Art thou he that should come or do we look for another?" He is seeking the truth and righteousness of God. That is at the heart of his ministry. Jesus' answer awakens us to what God seeks for us in his Advent to us. "Go and tell John again, those things which ye do see and hear: 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," words which are included in the Bidding Prayer of the Advent Service of Nine Lessons and Carols. They reveal to us the nature of redemption: it is nothing less than the wholeness and the restoration of our broken humanity. This is what John the Baptist seeks at the heart of his ministry; truth and righteousness in the awareness of our ignorance and sin. It means a commitment to truth and righteousness. "And blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me."

Jesus then turns to us as it were, addressing "the multitude concerning John." He highlights the importance of the ministry of John the Baptist as the messenger sent to prepare the way of the Lord, the one who is "a prophet" and yet "more than a prophet." In a torrent of questions, Jesus challenges us precisely about what we seek. What do we truly desire? He is suggesting that John the Baptist points us to the truth. "What went ye out for to see?" he asks with increasing intensity because it is about nothing less than what God wants for us, truth and rightness, which is the ultimate and only Good for us. Not something of passing moment, "a reed shaken with the wind[s]" of the world. Not "a man clothed in soft raiment" in the passing comforts of the world. But a prophet and more than a prophet, the one who brings the whole pageant of prophetic insight to its fulfillment. Jesus is the truth we seek.

The ministry of John the Baptist awakens us to that seeking of the will and truth of God for our humanity just as Mary embraces God's Word to let it take flesh in her and through her for us. "The Lord is at hand."

Repentance and rejoicing go hand in hand. Such are the anticipatory joys of Advent that awaken us to truth and the desire for truth in our lives. "What went ye out for to see?" It is one of the great questions for our world in despair and darkness. The tragedy of our age is the sad absence of a desire, the lack of a passion to see and know, to think and feel; in short, to be alive. It is almost as if we are afraid of knowing and have retreated into the ghettoes of our minds but having left our minds outside the door. "All men by nature desire to know," Aristotle famously says, picking up on Plato's *eros*, the passionate desire to know. They are right, it seems to me, at least in the sense of identifying a fundamental and essential feature of our humanity yet one which is much in question in the anti-intellectualism of our age where an instrumental logic dominates, diminishes and destroys us. In our cultural relativism we default to power over truth. We forget that knowing is linked inescapably to ethics, to our living in relation to what we know, in some sense or another, as truth, each in accord with our capacities to know. I don't mean 'your truth' or 'my truth'; such are the sophistries of our age which deny exactly what they assume. Advent is about the wisdom of God which is the condition of all human knowing and life.

We are recalled to the omnipresence of God's Truth at once always present and always coming to us. Such are the ministries of repentance and rejoicing, the ministries of John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Repent and rejoice!

Art thou he that should come or do we look for another?

Advent III, 2019

"He shall teach us of his ways"

Peace in the world is the theme of the Advent Ember season. The Ember Days remind us of the Pentecostal ministry of the Church through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and of particular themes associated with the greater seasons within which they are placed. Peace in the world is much to be wanted. But how is it to be achieved?

The readings for the Advent Ember Days speak profoundly to the *desiderata* of peace in the world. The conjunction of a reading from the prophet Micah with part of Luke's account of the Annunciation illuminates the deeper wonder of Advent. Peace is in God and in us through God's being with us, teaching us his ways; most profoundly in the coming of Christ through Mary, "most highly favoured lady."

Micah's prophecy or insight is proverbial with "swords being beaten into plowshares" and "spears into pruning-hooks." The imagery evokes the transition from war to peace and peace envisioned at once in agricultural ways and in contemplative ways. "They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree," Micah says, "and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it." Peace is meaningless unless it is without fear. Peace is ultimately at God's word.

Mary wonders at the initial salutation of the angel Gabriel. She was, we are told, "troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind" what it signifies. Gabriel responds, "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God. And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a Son, and shalt call his name Jesus." The angel goes on to speak of this child as "great" and as "the Son of the Highest" and "of his kingdom there shall be no end." Among the names of Christ in the Christmas mystery as signalled by Isaiah is "Prince of Peace" and "mighty God" and "of the increase of his government and peace, there shall be no end." Order and peace go together but they belong to God and so to God with us. "The Lord is with thee."

Peace is a universal desire but as Micah shows it really belongs to teaching and to learning, to our learning the ways of God and walking in his paths. The Advent and Christmas message is that we are taught by God about God's ways with us. Here that is signalled to us by prophecy and by the angel Gabriel. They are the messengers to us of what God seeks for us.

It belongs to the witness of the Church to recall us to these motions of divine love wherein we find our true peace. It is about nothing less than God in us and us in God. In Homer's *Iliad*, there is a wonderful description of the proverbial Shield of Achilles. It depicts two cities, the city at war and the city at peace. Micah's insight is about the transformation of the weapons of war into instruments of peace. That transformation is God's will at work in us and most especially in the Annunciation to Mary through whom God becomes man and one with us, showing us by the nature of his being with us peace and salvation. It is not without price. Through his stripes we shall be healed, our peace purchased by his blood. Such is the greater transformation of human sin and wickedness into the peace of God in Christ, now and always.

"The peace of God," as our liturgy constantly reminds us, is the peace "which passeth all understanding." That is to say that it is not a matter of mere human contrivance, not a matter of our making, but of God's making in us, in our hearts and in the banishing of all our fears. Such is the peace which Christ brings if we will be taught and learn of him.

"He shall teach us of his ways"

Eve of Advent Friday Ember Day, 2019

"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"

We seem to have come full circle. The Gospel for the Sunday Next Before Advent in our Canadian Prayer Book begins with John the Baptist looking upon Jesus as he walked and saying, "Behold the Lamb of God." This morning's Gospel on the Fourth Sunday in Advent, also from John's Gospel, ends with John the Baptist "seeing Jesus coming unto him, and saying, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Such is the witness of John the Baptist to the advent of Christ and to the meaning of human redemption.

In between the two Gospel readings for these Sundays are four verses which open us out to the mystery of Christ in his Advent to us. John the Baptist points us to Christ. That is his ministry. He identifies him as "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." But in the intervening verses (John 1.30-34), we have John's account of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. An Epiphany theme, it nonetheless highlights the fuller meaning of his witness to Christ, "the one who comes after me," he says, "ranks before me, for he was before." Why? Because he is divine. "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." This is the witness of John.

The form of this witness is instructive to us in our approach to Christ and to Christmas, our approach really to the mysteries of God and his love for us. Quite simply, John the Baptist, like Mary, shows us the attitude of faith. They provide the strong counter to the endless narcissisms of our age. As if it was all about us! But no. The witness of John is very much about *not* calling attention to himself, but to the "one who cometh after me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose," he says. The questions about John the Baptist in this Gospel are all turned by John to Christ. "Who are thou?" he is asked.

There is in this a wonderful sense of wonder about John the Baptist, this strange and arresting figure of ascetic rigour and disturbing intensity. Last Sunday, Jesus pointed to John the Baptist and the significance of his ministry of preparation. Today, John the Baptist insistently points to Christ. "I am not the Christ," he says. He calls attention not to himself but to Christ.

The questions about John the Baptist by the Priests and Levites reveal a deep desire, a yearning for the righteousness and the truth of God that belongs to the hope of Israel. But that hope is for all and is found only in God. "I am not the Christ," nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, John says. His "I am not" sayings are a poignant contrast to Christ's "I am." But who then is he? In a wonderful phrase that resounds down through the centuries of poetry and philosophy, John describes himself as *vox clamantis in deserto*, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." What does he cry? "Make straight the way of the Lord," quoting Isaiah (Is.40.3). In answer about his preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, a baptism which he says is "with water", he points to the coming of Christ, the one whom he will say in the intervening verses "is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." John points us to Christ, the Son of God and the Lamb of God.

John the Baptist highlights the wilderness of our world at the same time as he points us to grace and salvation coming to us in Christ. He does not point to himself but only to Christ. The wilderness is within us in our self-obsessions and preoccupations, in our frantic busyness and anxieties to make Christmas. The point is that Christmas is not of our making. It is all God's making albeit in us but that means to behold Christ. God is the great poet/maker of all things; the great poet/maker of Christmas. In Greek, *poesis*, poetry, is making, making with words.

Mary, too, yields her whole self to God to become the *Theotokos*, the God bearer. We await in the darkest time of nature's year to her giving birth to the Word and Light of God, to the "Immensity cloysterd in thy deare wombe" as another John, the poet John Donne, puts it ('Annunciation', *La Corona*). Through her "the Word was made flesh." This is the greater making. "'Twas much, that man was made like God before/ But, that God should be made like man, much more" (Donne, Sonnet # XV). The questions addressed to John the Baptist belong to the heightened intensity of our waiting and hers, to a sense of rejoicing for "the Lord is at hand."

The witness of John is about what we are given to behold and see in Christ. Without that witness, without that sense of awareness, our Christmas celebrations are but tinsel and wrap, mere empty show and vanity. It would be about 'ourselves' but bereft of the deeper truth of ourselves as found in the coming of God to us. If we are too much with ourselves, then we shall not be with God in Christ in the motions of his love coming to us. With John the Baptist, we learn to look to Christ and behold in him the redemption of ourselves and our humanity.

"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"

Advent 4, 2019

And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father

Christmas is really all about what we behold, about what we look at attentively; in short, to what we think about in a serious way. How strange and counter-culture that must seem in the hustle and bustle, the *stürm und drang*, the storm and stress of the Christmas season. And yet, perhaps, nothing is more needed.

What we are bidden to behold is the mystery of God, first and foremost, and then the mystery of God with us. This is the necessary corrective to all the frantic pressures and hectic busyness of Christmas and to its opposite in the empty loneliness of so many in the world of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band". We look out, I fear, on a world of lonely people, isolated and afraid. "Look at all the lonely people, where do they all come from, where do they all belong," as the Beatles sang in 'Eleanor Rigby.' It may be, too, that I am simply like Father Mackenzie, "writing the words of a sermon no one will hear."

What does Christmas mean in our post-Christian culture? Apart from the commercial aspects of getting and spending, I suspect it mostly has to do with a certain desire for a kind of coziness and comfort with family and friends, *hyggelig*, to use a Danish and Scandinavian term. But the pursuit of such material comforts paradoxically seems to create all of the anxieties of Christmas and turns *hygge* into something more like Edvard Munch's famous painting "The Scream." Cozy comfort and hugs become nordic noir! Instead of a more profound sense of the unity of our humanity we retreat into our little cubby-holes of comfort over and against what has become a fearful, uncertain, fractious and disordered world. We are trapped in a culture of divisiveness and fearful animosities.

But why? In part, because we make the mistake of thinking that we can and must make Christmas for ourselves over and against the other whoever that other may be; that we can and must make the world comfortable for ourselves which is always at the expense of others. We forget the radical meaning of Christmas which is about God and God's love for his creation and for the whole of our humanity. We forget everything that belongs to the wonder and the mystery of the Christmas scene. What is that scene? What do we behold? Simply this: Bethlehem is paradise restored. The images of Bethlehem in our churches and even in our post-Christian culture signal the mystery of God and man, of a mother and a child, of men and women, of shepherds and kings, of angels and sheep and, by extension and beyond the Scriptures, of ox and ass, of camels and peacocks, quite literally the whole menagerie of creation in the Christian imaginary of artists and poets. Bethlehem recalls us to the harmony and peace of the Creator and his creation, to something universal and yet intimate, a *hyggelig* that embraces rather than excludes.

We cannot make Christmas. So relax and behold the mystery which is the real comfort and true joy for our world-weary souls. God, the great poet and maker of all creation, is the great poet and maker of Christmas night. In Greek, the word for poetry, *poesis*, means making. The great readings of Christmas Eve signal the divine grandeur and mystery of God's Word coming to us in the awesome majesty of scriptural prophecy and in the sweet intimacy of his only-begotten son born of Mary in a lowly stable. Such is the mystery which we behold and which enfolds us in its light and truth.

It speaks to our hearts and minds about the real truth and dignity of our humanity. In the simple story of Christ's birth, God bestows himself upon us and embraces us in his life and truth. All things are in God and nothing is but what comes from God and is in God. "Without him was not anything made that was made," we hear. All that is, is of God and finds its truth in God.

The wonder of Christmas night lies in what we behold. The readings speak about the grandeur of God who "hath in these last days spoken unto us" not simply by words of prophecy but "by his Son"; though no mention of Jesus or Christ! Yet they speak to us about the mystery of God as Word, Son, and Light, powerful terms about the meaning of Jesus Christ that challenge our thinking and illuminate the wonder of Christmas. It is nothing less than the wonder of God who in his "infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, both visible and invisible" (Art. 1, Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, BCP, p. 699) wills to be "made flesh and dwell among us." It changes our humanity and our sense of ourselves because of what we are given to behold about God in his engagement with us.

The Gospel reading ends on a parenthetical note, at least as we have it in the King James Version which for some reason places in brackets our text, "and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father." It is almost as if something is hidden in plain sight and thus is paradoxically highlighted. Something is revealed for us to think and ponder, to behold and wonder. I was greatly tempted to use the Athanasian Creed in place of the Nicene Creed tonight and for two reasons: first, it provides a way to think the mystery of God and God with us that avoids collapsing God into ourselves and our concerns, as if we make God, turning him into Santa Claus, as it were, and, secondly, because one of its phrases reveals so powerfully the true mystery of Christ's Incarnation: "not by conversion of Godhead into flesh but by the taking of manhood into God." The real comfort and joy of Christmas is our being gathered into the life of God. Such is love for "God is love and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him." We abide in what we behold.

Here is the true dignity of our humanity. Love came down at Christmas. This is the Christian message: that love is God and God is with us and that makes all the difference. It is what we are given to behold.

And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father

Christmas Eve, 2019

And this shall be a sign unto you

The gentle quiet of Christmas morn is itself a Christmas blessing, a gift to the understanding. In the noise of our world and day we overlook what is wrought in the great silences of God. Creation, Christ's Incarnation, and Christ's Resurrection all happen "in the deep silence of God"; we know them only after the fact. Ignatius of Antioch, one of the Apostolic Fathers, second-generation Christians as it were who had first-hand contact with the Apostles, speaks wonderfully about the silences of God.

> Mary's virginity was hidden from the prince of this world; so was her child-bearing, and so was the death of the Lord. All these three trumpet-tongued secrets were brought to pass in the deep silence of God. How then were they made known to the world? Up in the heavens a star gleamed out, more brilliant than all the rest; no words could describe its lustre, and the strangeness of it left men bewildered … The age-old empire of evil was overthrown, for God was now appearing in human form to bring in a new order, even life without end (Ignatius's Epistle to the Ephesians).

He could be commenting on this morning's readings. "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men," Paul tells us in his letter to Titus. "And she brought forth her first-born son," Luke tells us. Such are the quiet graces of Christmas morn.

They are there for our understanding, a challenge and a counter to our post-Christian world. How do we think God? Through the dance of apophatic and kataphatic theology, the dance of negation and affirmation that distinguishes God as the principle upon which everything depends and so is not to be confused with anything in the created order. Without the dance of "this is thou and neither is this thou" we collapse God into ourselves and into all of the petty nonsense of our world and day. Such is our atheism. It is for that reason that the so-called Athanasian Creed with its sequences of negation and affirmation about the mystery of God as Trinity and the mystery of Christ's Incarnation might well be our best Christmas contemplation. "Without forsaking what he was," namely, God, "he became what he was not," namely, man, as Athanasius himself says, providing the key insight that belongs to the Creed which much later came to be named after him. We cannot *not* think God and we can only think God in this way.

The mystery of the union of God and man is the heart of Christmas, its wonder and truth. Nothing is but what is in God and apart from God nothing is. The mystery of God with us is the mystery of God himself. All of the wonderful images of the Christmas scene laid out so wonderfully by Luke for us this morning are but signs that point to the wonder of God. Angels and shepherds come to worship and so do we. To worship is to contemplate what is worthy of all our attention. We are enfolded into the mystery which we behold. Through the dance of negation and affirmation we participate in the mystery of Christ, the Word made flesh, "wrapped in swaddling bands and lying in a manger." The very contrast between such glory and such lowliness is the greater glory, the greater unity of God in whom all things find their truth and being.

God does not cease to be God in becoming man. The humble story of the babe wrapped in swaddling bands in Luke's account matches the splendour of John's account of the Word made flesh. They are one as Christ is one, "not by the conversion of the Godhead into flesh but by the taking of manhood into God," as the Athanasian Creed so eloquently puts it in the dance of negation and affirmation. And here in the swaddling bands of the sacrament is the sign and signified, the means of our participation in the mystery of Christ's holy birth, his life born in us and given to us that he might dwell in us and we in him. John Betjman's poem, 'Christmas', points us to the truth of Christmas.

And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall ?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me ?

And is it true ? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissued fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare -
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

In the quiet silence of Christman morn we hear the angels sing and in our hearts and voices join with them in singing the "trumpet-tongued secrets" of the wonder of God in Christ's holy birth. "The babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" is God and God with us, the sign and the signified.

And this shall we be a sign unto you

Christmas Morn, 2019

Lord, lay not this sin to their charge

"Human kind cannot bear very much reality," T.S. Eliot observes in his 1935 drama, Murder in the Cathedral. That play along with the well-known and well-beloved Christmas Carol, Good King Wenceslaus,written by John Mason Neale in 1853 and sung to a 13th century spring dance melody (*Tempus Adest Floridum*), offer an intriguing commentary on the Christmas mystery. In Eliot's play, a sermon preached by Archbishop Thomas a Becket Christmas morning serves as prologue to his martyrdom on December 29th, 1170. The sermon focuses on the Feast of Stephen which falls immediately after Christmas Day. The hymn draws upon a 12th account of a 10th century Duke of Bohemia's generosity and service towards the poor.

St. Stephen is the proto-martyr, the first martyr and prototype of martyrdom in the Christian understanding. He was also one of the first set of deacons in the nascent and emerging Christian community. Thus, sacrifice and service are intimately connected. The hymn makes no direct reference to the Nativity of Christ but narrates a story of service to the poor on "the Feast of Stephen." The sermon in the play makes explicit the connection between Christ's birth and Stephen's martyrdom and in so doing illuminates the deeper meaning of Christmas.

It is no accident that the Feast of St. Stephen follows directly upon the Feast of the Nativity of Christ. It highlights the deeper reality of the meaning of Christ's holy birth. "Just as we rejoice and mourn at once, in the Birth and in the Passion of Our Lord; so also, in a smaller figures, we both rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs." We celebrate Christ's birth by remembering his Passion and death; such is the sacrament. "Do this in remembrance of me." We cannot conceive of Christmas apart from the reality of his Passion and Death for us. "We celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross." This is all part of the reality from which we shy away but which the special feasts of Christmas remind us, starting with St. Stephen's day. As Eliot has the Archbishop note, "as the World sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the World will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason?"But that is exactly the Christian reality.

Stephen was stoned to death because of his witness to Christ. Such is violence and persecution, the beginning of a long and continuing story of the persecution of Christians right up to this day. The lesson from Acts makes that clear. "Behold," Stephen says, "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God." This leads to him being stoned and with a note about the complicity of Saul, later known as Paul. But most importantly, Stephen's last words echo Christ's words of forgiveness from the Cross. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," Jesus says; "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," says Stephen. Powerful words that along with the hymn and sermon teach us that Christ's birth and its celebration mean sacrifice and service.

Despite the popular and rather sentimental nature of the carol, its reference to the Feast of Stephen helps to temper the cozy sentiments of the season with a dose of hard reality about the disconnect between comfort and poverty and between 'peace and goodwill', on the one hand, and persecution and violence, on the other hand. These realities the Christmas

mystery will not let us ignore; in part through the Feast of Stephen which provides a stark reminder of sin and evil overcome by the grace of the forgiveness of sins in Christ's sacrifice. As another popular carol, a 14th century carol translated by John Mason Neale, 'Good Christian Men, Rejoice,' reminds us, "Christ was born for this."

Christ's holy nativity embraces the harsh realities of our world and day, now and always. Forgiveness is the quality of Christ which informs our lives of sacrifice and service. Such is the Christmas message of love in sacrifice and service.

Lord, lay not this sin to their charge

Feast of Stephen, 2019

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you

The Feast of St. John the Evangelist immediately recalls the wonderful words of Christmas Eve. "That which was from the beginning" is the Word which "was with God and was God" without which "was not anything made that was made." Christ is the Word of God, the Divine Word and Son. It can only follow that "the world itself could not contain the books that should be written" about all the things which Jesus did. Such is the contemplative meaning of God with us.

Christ's Incarnation does not exhaust the riches of God; rather it enfolds us in its mystery and truth which is always more and never less than what we can imagine and know. The witness of John the Evangelist in his Gospel and in his epistles contributes greatly to the understanding and development of Christian doctrine. The Christmas message of John emphasizes the divine reality of Christ as Word and the human reality of his embodiment in the flesh of our humanity; in short, the Word made flesh is real.

It is not fake news. The Epistle and the Gospel make a claim to the truth of the witness not just by assertion but by argument. The argument is the idea of the Incarnation itself as being the Word, and Son, and Light of God come into the world in Christ, a light which is greater than the darkness of sin and evil. "We have seen, and bear witness, and declare unto you" John tells us, again and tellingly in parenthesis, "that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us." There is in this a sense of urgency and a sense of contemplative wonder.

This is the corrective to all our mistaken notions about God which reduce God to our agendas and concerns as if we have taken God captive to our desires. Such is the vanity of our attempt to absolutize the finite and so to deny the infinite. Christ's Incarnation is about God and our humanity, each in their integrity and fullness, and yet one in Christ. The Christian mystery seen with the eyes of John is about God making us adequate to himself through himself becoming man in Jesus Christ. The Incarnate Son of God is the eternal Son of God. "There was not when he was not" (Athanasius). Incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, as the Creed puts it does not mean that he ceases to be God. Such is the wonder and the mystery of God and of God with us that John the Evangelist so powerfully presents to us. Such is the great wonder of Christmas. It is always more and never less than what we can imagine and know.

These things have been written not only for our learning but as John says "that our joy may be full." And what is that joy? Fellowship with one another and with God: "that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." This is the great joy of Christmas and the meaning of our fellowship with one another. It is grounded in our fellowship with God. Such is the Christmas message of love-in-contemplation.

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you

Feast of St. John the Evangelist, Xmas 2019

These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth

If the reality of the stoning of St. Stephen was more than we can bear, how shall we ever bear the heart-rending story of the Holy Innocents? And how shall we possibly make sense of it in relation to the sentiments of the Christmas season. How is this joy and peace and goodwill? How is this truth and love, mercy and grace? And yet it is.

No feast of Christmas week speaks more profoundly, albeit disturbingly, to the reality of Christ's holy birth. Here is a story which disturbs or should disturb us and yet belongs to the tragic realities of our world and day, a world which witnesses to the endless sufferings and death of countless little ones. They are, as in Matthew's account, the innocent ones, those who are unable to harm and yet are harmed themselves. They are the victims of the convenience of others, the victims of the machinations of individuals and nations. They are those whose deaths seem so utterly pointless and meaningless.

There are the sad realities of abortion, of the slaughter of children in the war zones of the world, of the deaths of the little ones through famine and pestilence. These are some of the inescapable realities of our world; complicated and complex, to be sure, but also terrifying and heart-rending. How amazing that during the Christmas season which celebrates the birth of God as a child we are asked to contemplate the deaths of the little ones!

Christ is God's "great little one." He takes his humanity from the blessed Virgin Mary. There is a sense of wonder in his birth, a sense of joy and an awakening to hope and peace, good will and harmony. Yet the Christmas story is very much about the dark realities of the human condition, about the stark realities of sin and evil. "He came unto his own and his own received him not," you might remember from Christmas Eve. "There was no room for them in the inn," you might recall from Christmas Day.

Christmas does not hide from view such realities. It gives us a way to face them and to do so in the paradox of God's grace signalled in the lesson from Revelation. The Holy Innocents are seen as the pure and innocent ones who "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth." Yet the Holy Innocents are the little children of Bethlehem whom Herod, seeking to remove a potential rival to his throne, has killed. His violent act recalls the ancient policy of infanticide inaugurated by Pharaoh to contain and control the Hebrews. The phrase "out of Egypt have I called my Son" references the story of the Exodus. In every way, these lessons seek to connect the deaths of the little ones to Christ and to the purpose of his coming.

There is in this a great insight and one which belongs to the radical truth of Christmas. Nothing is hid from God and God alone and only God can make something good out of human evil. What the Feast of the Innocents proclaims is that no life is meaningless in the eyes of God. Here the Holy Innocents follow even as they go before and portend the sacrifice of Christ. There is blood in Bethlehem already in the blood of the Holy Innocents and yet their deaths are joined to Christ's eternal sacrifice in his love for the Father in the bond of the Holy Spirit from "before the foundations of the world." And so while they go

before, they follow Christ. The truth and meaning of their lives is found in Christ, in the love of God for our humanity, no matter the horror and the evil we confront.

In the pastoral ministry, there are perhaps no harder things to deal with than those who have suffered the loss of children, and especially little children. Yet it is this Gospel story which gives meaning to such terrible things, the terrible things which belong to our disordered world. The innocence of the little ones belongs to the sacrificial purity of Christ, "that pure one opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God and which he himself made pure," as Irenaeus says about Mary. They participate in Christ's pure sacrifice. It is nothing less than the deep love of God who alone makes something out of the nothingness of sin and evil.

There is no human comfort, "Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not."There is only the divine comfort which says that they are in God for they "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth." Such are the deeper realities of the Christmas mystery of love-in-purity.

These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth

The Feast of Holy Innocents, Xmas 2019

When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman

There is a rich fullness to Christmas, a fullness of images seen and heard, in crèche and carol, in sacrament and word. It highlights an important feature of the Christian faith. It is about the fullness of images rather than an emptying of images. But the images of Christmas are not nothing. They are not mere images, empty signs; rather they are signs that signify a fullness of meaning. They have, as it were, a sacramental quality to them. They point to the reality of Emmanuel, "which being interpreted, is," as Matthew states, "God with us." All of the images of Christmas dance and swirl around the mystery of God and of God with us; the idea of the sign and the thing signified have very much to do with our incorporation into the life of God through Christ's incarnation. Such is "the fullness of the time."

This has a profound significance for how we think about what it means to be human. God's intimate engagement with our humanity in Christ's holy nativity signals something profound about our humanity. It signals that our humanity finds its truth and fullness in God. As the reading from Galatians indicates, this means a certain preparation and readiness through God's will at work in time and, more importantly, in the intersection between time and eternity captured, I think, in Paul's rich phrase "the fullness of the time." It suggests a certain moment of rightness, of the making adequate of our humanity for this realization in time that gives time and our humanity its truth and meaning. The concept of "the fullness of the time" also applies to humankind historically in terms of cultures and individual lives.

"There came," T.S. Eliot says in 'Choruses from "The Rock,"' "at a predetermined moment, a moment in time /and of time,/ A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history:/ transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a moment of time,/ A moment in time but time was made through that moment:/ for without the meaning there is no time, and that moment/ of time gave the meaning." As he explains, "it seem[s] as if men must proceed from light to light, in the/ light of the Word,/ through the Passion and Sacrifice saved in spite of their negative being; /Bestial as always before, carnal, self-seeking as always before,/ selfish and purblind as ever before,/ Yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their/march on the way that was lit by the light; /Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other way."

For there is no other way than the way of God despite our "negative being" and our wandering ways of deceit and confusion, of certainty and uncertainty, of sin and folly. God makes our way to him through the way of his coming to us at "the fulness of the time." This is the wondrous mystery which we behold in the Christmas scene of the Word made flesh, of the babe of Bethlehem wrapped in the swaddling bands of our humanity, "incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary." Christ is "that pure one," as Irenaeus so beautifully puts it, "opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God and which he himself made pure." "Made of a woman," says Paul, "made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."

We are the adopted sons of God through the Son of God made man of the Virgin Mary. A new and astounding dignity has been bestowed upon our humanity at "the fulness of the time," when all things were in a kind of readiness, a readiness defined and established by God.

Just so, "the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise," meaning that it happened in this manner and at this time, as Matthew tells us in his account of Christ's nativity. There is the startling and shocking reality of Mary's pregnancy; her being "found with child of the Holy Ghost." Joseph, not knowing this - how could he, what would it mean? - "was minded to put her away privily," because, "being a just man," he was "not willing to make her a public example." His perplexity of mind is answered by the angel of the Lord "appear[ing] unto him in a dream." Dreams are an ancient means through which knowledge is conveyed, especially knowledge of what is more than human, yet through which things are learned about what it means to be human. Gilgamesh, for example, is prepared to meet Enkidu through a sequence of dreams signifying that Enkidu will be his comrade and friend, a second self. Through that encounter Gilgamesh changes from being a bad and abusive king, through the exercise of might over right, to becoming more human and more caring of others, and, thus, ultimately, the hero of the ancient Sumerian culture.

It belongs to the quality of soul in Joseph that he can be taught by an angel. The question itself is one which is taken up directly by Thomas Aquinas. "Can man be taught by the angels?" The answer is yes; in part because angels and men are spiritual and intellectual beings. The angels, he suggests, "move our imagination and strengthen our understanding." This is what we see with Joseph being taught by the angel that "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost" and that he "shall be called JESUS." The name is shouted out to us, as it were, in capital letters, "for he shall save his people from their sins." Jesus means saviour.

The holy days of Christmastide are like the opening of gifts. Through the fullness of the images of Christmas, we discover more and more their meaning and truth, unwrapping what the images signify and being drawn more and more into the mystery of Christ which they reveal. That the story has so many moving parts which cannot be reduced to a linear progression is because it is at once in time and of time but more than time. It is God in our midst gathering us into the mystery of the fullness of his life and being.

"Love is in the nature of a first gift through which all gifts are given" (Aquinas). Among the gifts is the moving of our imaginations and the strengthening of our understanding of Christ's holy nativity. It happens through our attention to these images seen and heard, all of which belong to "the fulness of the time," in which the gift of the child Christ is given to us and for us to see and hear.

When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman

Fr. David Curry
Sunday After Christmas 2019

His name was called JESUS

The descriptive titles for today are a bit of a mouthful: "The Octave Day of Christmas and the Circumcision of Christ being New Year's Day," and, as if to underline the titles, we have not one, not two, but three Collects! All this belongs to the rich fullness of the Christmas mystery and yet that rich fullness, so theologically significant and doctrinally suggestive, centers on the name of Jesus, literally highlighted for us in Luke's account by being printed in capital letters. JESUS. In the digital culture, it is a shout-out.

We learned via St. Matthew's Gospel on Sunday that his name means 'saviour'; "for he shall save his people from their sins." Yeshua - Joshua - Jesus, saviour. It is a compelling and intriguing term, a name with an explicit meaning, a name signifying the divine purpose of Christ's holy birth, a name *named* by the angel, *named* by Joseph, and now *named* by Mary herself. It is a name worth pondering upon, in the manner of Mary and Joseph, in contemplative wonder.

The rich fullness of images which belong to the crowded cluster of things in the Bethlehem scene all center on Jesus and on who he is for us. Emmanuel means God with us and that, too, is said, of the Son brought forth of a Virgin. But what God with us actually means takes on a much fuller meaning with the actual name, Jesus, saviour. It speaks of redemption and of what God seeks for our humanity which is nothing less, it seems, than our actual incorporation into the life of God through God speaking divine things to us in human ways. Such is the incarnation. The deeper reality of this divine speaking humanly, and resoundingly, we might say, is seen in the particular feature of Christ's circumcision. At once a required ritual belonging to Jewish religious identity, it also signals the reality of Christ's humanity. It belongs to the rituals of the Jewish Law and yet speaks universally to the redemption of the whole of our humanity.

That is salvation. It is accomplished in and through the sacrifice of Christ, in and through his taking our sins upon him and saving us from all that diminishes and destroys the real truth of our humanity which is found in Christ. God with us means God giving himself for us.

There is blood in Bethlehem. This we have already seen in the disturbing and yet profound feast of the Holy Innocents. "These are they who follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth," Revelation tells us. They follow even though they go before; they follow because as with all of us we derive our being and our life from God and thus from God in Christ. And "whithersoever he goeth" implies already the Cross. The deaths of the little ones are intimately joined to Christ in his sacrifice which is only possible through his body, his flesh. We are joined to Christ. He suffers in us and we in him even when we are the cause of the suffering.

With the circumcision of Christ, there is again blood in Bethlehem. It is literally the blood of Christ, "made of a woman, made under the law," Paul tells us, "to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." Such is "the fullness of

the time" through which time and our humanity finds its truth and meaning. It is found in our incorporation into the body of Christ.
Christian theology will argue for baptism as the Christian complement to circumcision and, without taking away from its bodily and indeed gendered reality, will point to the circumcision of our hearts as the necessary requirement for our being embodied, as it were, in Christ. It marks a new and radical beginning just as we embark upon the beginning of new year in secular terms. The point is that the secular too finds its truth and meaning in the sacred; an old truth which we would do well to reclaim and so free ourselves from the endlessness of the narratives of conflict. "Thou couldest have no power at all against me," Jesus says to Pontius Pilate, "except it were given thee from above." All power and all truth is of God. In Christ, God is with us but his being with us is about salvation. His name is Jesus.

The idea of blood in Bethlehem highlights for us the deeper meaning of the Christmas mystery. It is the mystery of redemption, of Christ as Saviour through his death and passion. This reality only heightens the exaltant names in Isaiah's great hymn, the names that are like titles, like jewels in Christ's crown of thorns: "Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." It is hard not to break forth into song but these are terms which adorn the name of Jesus. They belong to the mystery which we are bidden to contemplate, being like Mary and "keep[ing] all these things" that are said about "this thing which has come to pass" and ponder[ing] them in [our] hearts." We ponder the mystery of Jesus, saviour.

His name was called JESUS

Fr. David Curry
Octave Day of Christmas, 2019

One thing is necessary and Mary hath chosen the better part

The rich fullness of Christmas is often matched by a frantic busyness like Martha in the story of Mary and Martha, "anxious and troubled by a multitude of things" (Luke 10.41). The anxiety of Martha is literally about being too careful, too full of cares and worries. Not that there aren't care and worries, to be sure, especially in the confusion and nonsense of the disordered world of the past two decades. But there is a wonderful counter to our fears and anxieties, of busyness and worries in Jesus' gentle response. One thing is necessary.

What is that *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary? What is "the better part" chosen by Mary? It is another Mary who shows us exactly what is the *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary, the Mary of the Christmas story, the Virgin Mary through whom God becomes man and dwells among us. This is the Mary of the Gospel reading today on what is the Second Sunday of Christmas and the Eve of the Epiphany. The one thing necessary is our contemplation of the wonder of Christ's holy birth. We contemplate the wonder of God and of God with us just as the Magi-Kings will fall down and worship offering gifts which teach the wonder they acknowledge. Christ is God, and King, and Sacrifice.

Both stories of the Marys are told to us by Luke. "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." What are all these things? They are "those things which were told them by the shepherds who went "unto Bethlehem" to "see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." The Mary of the Christmas story shows us what belongs to the true response of our humanity to what is made known to us by God with us. God speaks to us in human vesture even through the unspeaking Word and Son of God in the infant Christ. What is said about him belongs to who he is for us even as the unspeaking babe of Bethlehem. An infant is one who cannot speak. Mary's attitude is the essential attitude of faith. It is contemplative wonder at all that is said about the child Christ.

This does not deny or diminish the importance of human actions and busyness. It does however challenge us about our busyness and our practical activities by reminding us that ultimately they are grounded and have their real truth and meaning in the activity of contemplation which is the highest activity of our humanity. This redeems our everyday busyness from its frantic mindlessness and frightening emptiness.

Here is the counter to the particular forms of disorder and disarray that belong to our technocratic culture. It is without meaning and cannot provide any meaning for our humanity because a world governed by technology is fundamentally not a human world. It is a world where we turn ourselves into machines, into products, into the misuse and abuse of one another, in short, into means rather than ends. It means the loss of our humanity, albeit a self-inflicted loss in our unthoughtfulness.

The Christmas story shows us the truth of our humanity in the God made man, in the Word made flesh, and, especially, in the figure of Mary. She "preserves in her memory", "keeping carefully in her mind" the "things that were spoken" about the child Christ. She "ponders" those things "in her heart". This is the *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary without

which all our other busyness is nothing. It is a profoundly spiritual and intellectual activity but one which speaks to the whole of our being even as God has embraced the whole of our humanity in the Incarnation of Christ.

As a Church, let alone a culture, we have to learn again the *unum necessarium* and to ponder the wonder of God. *Pondus meum amor meus*, "My weight is my love," Augustine famously says, echoing a Platonic and Aristotelian concept about the *eros* of our humanity, the passionate desire to know. We are defined by what we behold, by that to which we are willing to commit ourselves; in short, to attend. The Mary of the Christmas story and Mary, the sister of Martha, remind us of the real truth and dignity of our humanity. It is found in our contemplative wonder of the things of God with us. It is the *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary.

It changes everything. We return to our places, our usual ways, T. S. Eliot suggests in his rich and evocative poem, the Journey of the Magi, "but no longer at ease". Something has changed for us for ever in what we have sought for and journeyed to see. What is it? Birth and Death. "Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?" he has a Magi-King ask.

> There was a Birth certainly.
> We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
> But had thought they were different; this Birth was
> Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

Exactly. The contemplation of the mystery of Christ concentrates for us the mystery of our humanity as gathered into the mystery of God. The mysteries of life and death belong to the mystery of God. Mary ponders this mystery, keeping carefully in her mind all the things which were told them by the shepherds about the child Christ. We are to ponder and keep in our hearts and minds all the things spoken about and by Christ, attending to his Word and letting the love of Christ be the weight of our souls.

This is the great joy and meaning of Christmas that carries over into Epiphany. It is about attending to the things of God made known to us in the humanity of Christ.

One thing is necessary and Mary hath chosen the better part

Fr. David Curry
Second Sunday of Christmas
January 5th, 2020

Fra Angelico & Fra Filippo Lippi, (c. 1440/1460)