

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2009, Liturgical Year "C"
ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"Christmas: It's Only the Beginning"

JOY TO THE WORLD!

What a great hymn! *Joy to the World* is a beloved Christmas hymn which believe it or not, is really not about Christmas. Oh yes, we sing the words at Christmas and they echo the Christmas Spirit, but let's look at them again for a moment. ***"Joy to the World, the Lord is come...Let earth receive her king..."*** The world has not received Christ as her king, has it? Not yet. Just a couple weeks ago at the UN Global Climate Summit Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark all Christmas trees were banned. Why? The UN didn't want to give the impression it was endorsing a religion!

"The Savior Reigns," Jesus is not literally reigning on earth, is He? Not yet. ***"No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground;"*** The last I checked we still do battle with sin, we experience sorrow and thorns are still growing in the ground outside - well at least down south at this time of the year.

"He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness..." Not yet, my friends, but the day is coming! The truth is *Joy to the World* was penned by the English hymn writer Isaac Watts in the early 1700's to celebrate the Lord's triumphant return at the end of the age.

You see, Christmas is part one in God's plan of salvation. Jesus came the first time to set the wheels in motion for the final age of mankind. He came to inaugurate the age of grace; to let the world see what happens when people seek to follow Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to rule and direct their hearts. But Jesus didn't finish His Father's work. Oh yes, He did with respect to our sin and standing before God, but not in terms of His reign and rule; and not in terms of the final judgment of mankind.

Such things won't take place until His Second Coming. In fact, when we look at the Bible we find that the Second Coming of Jesus is going to be the greatest event of all of the ages. It is mentioned more than any other event in the Bible. For example, we all know that the new birth is vitally important, but it is only mentioned nine times in the New Testament. Baptism is vitally important, but it is found only 20 times in the New Testament. Repentance is essential but it is only talked about 70 times in the Bible. But what about the return of the Lord Jesus Christ? Our Lord's return is mentioned in God's Word over 380 times. One out of every 25 verses points to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's what we look forward to Christ's return even as we look back at Christmas. Some say well what's taking Him so long. Sometimes I wonder, too, but then I remember what it says in **2 Peter 3:3-8**:

³First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." ⁵But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. ⁸But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." The Lord's delay is actually a reflection of His mercy! In fact, if God had not delayed, neither you or I would be here today.

WHAT SHOULD WE BE DOING IN PREPARATION FOR CHRIST'S RETURN?

Now if Christ is coming back what should we be doing in the meantime? What is the Church to be about? The Christmas narrative shows us. Please look again at our reading from **Luke 2:1-20**.

Oh, but before I forget, did you hear about a recent article in the *New York Times*? President Obama and the First Family were planning a "non-religious Christmas," according to Social Secretary Desiree Rogers. Ms. Rogers reportedly told a gathering of former social secretaries that the Obama's did not intend on putting the Nativity scene on display – a longtime East Room tradition. The comment drew an audible gasp from the tight-knit group of former secretaries. To avoid a potential public relations nightmare, the Obama's backtracked.

The White House confirmed to the *New York Times* that there had been internal discussions about making Christmas more inclusive – but in the end – tradition won out – and the Nativity scene is once again in its traditional East Room spot.

Fox News Radio Todd Starnes said he received the following email response from the White House, specifically the First Lady's office when asked about the incident: "*It has been a part of White House Christmas decorations in the past, it is on display in the East Room for all to enjoy and it will continue to be a part of White House Christmas decorations moving forward...The President spoke movingly about the scene the crèche depicts in his remarks at the lighting of the National Christmas Tree last week: "Tonight, we celebrate a story that is as beautiful as it is simple. The story of a child born far from home to parents guided only by faith, but who would ultimately spread a message that has endured for more than 2,000 years – that no matter who we are or where we are from, we are each called to love one another as brother and sister. While this story may be a Christian one, its lesson is universal. It speaks to the hope we share as a people. And it represents a tradition that we celebrate as a country – a tradition that has come to represent more than any one holiday or religion, but a season of brotherhood and generosity to our fellow citizens."*

Wow! Talk about missing the whole point of Christmas!!! You see our president and many do not understand or refuse to understand the significance of Christmas and Who and what Christmas is really about. The Christmas Spirit is not first and foremost about loving our neighbor or giving to one another or having compassion for the downtrodden. While it may include such things, it involves much, much more. Please turn with me now to our reading from **Luke 2**.

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT IS A SPIRIT OF WORSHIP

v.20: "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen..."

Notice what the Shepherds do in response to the angel's announcement and in reaction to seeing the Messiah? They praised and glorified God. In other words, they worshipped the Lord. Do you remember what Mary did when the angel told her she would be with child conceived by the Holy Spirit - she praised God? We have her thoughts recorded in the Magnificat in **Lk. 1:46-56**. Or how about the wise men, the magi from the East? When they arrived later in the year to visit the baby Jesus they not only gave gifts but we are told in **Matthew 2:10** that when they saw Mary and the baby "*they fell down and worshipped Him*."

You see the spirit of Christmas is not primarily about good cheer, or thoughts of peace and good will, or giving gifts (though certainly those things play an important role) the Spirit of Christmas is first and foremost about worship.

That's why we gather tonight - to worship the newborn King; to let the Lord know, to let the world know that He is the most important person in our lives. I mean let's face it. Without the Lord, we would not only have nothing, but we would not exist. Without the Living God we would not have life.

Now what exactly is worship? In the Hebrew, the word for worship is *shahah*, and it literally means "*to fall down before God with one's whole self - body, mind, and spirit.*" It means surrendering your entire being in total reverence and awe of Almighty God. It is the starting point in developing a relationship with God. It is why people turn to the Lord. It is also why people if they don't turn to the Lord end up worshipping other things.

We worship the Lord by giving our all back to God in response to who He is and to what He has done. We worship God because He is worthy of our worship. We worship because of His glory and His goodness. He has given us life, He has given us our bodies, He has given us eternal life, He has made the universe and all that is seen and unseen and He has shown us the way to true life. We not only worship the Lord for all that He has given us but for all that He has promised. You have heard me say it before, we walk by faith in the promises of God who cannot lie, not by our feelings that come and go.

And part of our worship is to set aside one day a week to Him. Do you remember the 4th commandment? ***Keep the Sabbath Holy.*** Do you know what that means to keep something holy? It means to set it aside, to set it apart for the Lord. When we keep the Sabbath holy it simply means that we set the day aside to worship and spend time with the Lord.

I mean that's the first reason why we should go to church. We don't go to first and foremost simply to feel good about ourselves or because it is convenient. There will be times when it will be inconvenient, someone will rub you the wrong way, you may not like the sermon, and so forth. But that is not the primary reason we go. We go to let the Lord know that He is most important in our lives and we do it because God says it is good for us. Listen to His Word for a moment.

"God inhabits the praises of His people" (Ps. 22:3). In other words, our worship unleashes the power and presence of God. It is not merely a reaction to who God is, it actually elevates us into God's presence.

"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). That's a promise! God will never reject anyone who comes to Him in humility and sincerity.

Jesus said, ***"...the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeks such to worship him"*** (John 4:23). Do you want to be blessed? Worship the Lord your God in Spirit and Truth.

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT IS A FAMILY SPIRIT

What else is true about the Christmas Spirit? It is a family spirit. I find it remarkable that the Lord God of the universe came to us as a babe in humble circumstances. He came to poor folk, in a manger, without any worldly fanfare or adulation. But the fact that God came in the midst of a family is profound. All should take note. It teaches us two among many truths. First, God is the author of the whole idea of family. When we look at the family of persons in the Trinity, when we look at the creation of man as male and female and the context in which new life begins, it is clear that God created us to be in relationship with one another. And there can be a no stronger affirmation of the family than God being in the center as a babe to two parents.

Second, family is the basis for the well-being of individuals and society. Any problem, any ill in society usually can be traced back to the family setting. The truth is a church will only be as strong as the families in the church, the same can be said for a community, for a nation, indeed for an entire civilization. I believe Christ came to earth as a child not only to show the incredible love of God, and purity and righteousness of God, but to show that the family is God ordained and is the basis for everything in life.

The family you are part of is not primarily by choice but by God's design. And we have an obligation to support and build each other up in our families. Satan seeks to break families down because if they are divided, if there is discord, they then lose the God-given blessing and protection that strong families provide.

I am amazed when I hear people today, usually the so-called elite of our society say things like it doesn't matter what kind of family people have. Or that a husband and wife family is a relatively modern phenomenon. Really? Seems like it was quite common 2000 years ago! Jesus came to be a son to a mom and a dad - not to two moms or two dads, or to a polygamous community. The fact remains, that a society will be strong if two parent households stay faithful in monogamous married relationships.

Moreover, God called us to have children. But what do we find in today's modern Western World? An aversion to having children because of selfishness - people don't want to be burdened. And second, because they fall into the trap of thinking why would I want to bring anyone into the world because of how bad things are or for fear of overpopulating the world. Can you believe it? And what happens? Easy abortion and a low birth rate. Think of all of how many future scientists, physicians, musicians, and the like have been lost? In fact, due to abortion and the above line of thought, there are countries in Europe and Japan that are actually losing population because of a 0 or negative birth rate! And yet in Moslem countries, the populations continue to grow due to a high birth rate.

The truth remains that the way we impact the world is through developing strong families that are Christ-centered. This is one of the true messages of Christmas. But something else is also true about the Christmas Spirit.

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT IS A SPIRIT OF PROCLAMTION

We read from **Luke 2:17** that after the Shepherds heard and saw the baby Jesus they not only praised and glorified God (ie. worshipped Him) but they shared with others the good news of Jesus. **Luke 2:17** states "*They made known the saying which has been told them concerning the child - what saying? "I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."*" The way we are going to impact the world is not only by worshipping the Lord and building strong families, but by sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed; by proclaiming the truth that He is Lord and Savior. This is how our world has been changed.

Yes, there is still evil. Yes, the devil is still active. Yes, there is still a spiritual battle to be fought. But oh how things have changed in 2000 years. When Christ came, pagan Rome ruled the world and the other civilizations whether in China or Africa, or our Western Hemisphere were gripped by false gods and pagan religion. But within 300 years, the Empire that had sought to ostracize, ridicule and persecute Christians became Christian itself. The Jews who did not believe in Christ saw the very movement they rejected dwarf their Jewish faith. The barbarian hordes that invaded Rome and Western Europe eventually became Christian themselves, as did the Vikings of the North. During the ensuing centuries Christianity spread through Africa and the Americas and now even to China and the Far East. Hundreds of millions know Christ, hundreds of millions have heard of Christ.

And we have been blessed to know Jesus as well. It is now our call to let others know. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain: the blessing of being used by God to bring others into His Kingdom so that when Christ returns we can join with the Angels and all the saints and proclaim together "*Joy to the World, the Lord has come, let earth receive her king!!!*"

This is the true meaning and message of Christmas: to worship the Lord God, to build strong families and to share the good news of Jesus in word and deed. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!