

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2011, Liturgical Year "B"  
**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**  
The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

*"The Triumph of Christmas"*

**MERRY CHRISTMAS!**

How about this weather? I know some were dreaming of a White Christmas but I think we'll take the no snow. Funny, because ten years ago in 2001 we had only a few inches to that point, and then got socked on Christmas Eve with a major snowstorm. It kept snowing until we had 80 inches through New Year's Eve! Thankfully, that won't happen this year. In fact, I think we should for a "winter that never was!"

Now this weekend is also another, but one that is much more significant than a snowstorm. Twenty years ago tomorrow marked the official end of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev resigned from his office and the Soviet Union formally broke up on December 25, 1991. How ironic that on Christmas Day, a nation built on the pre-supposition that there is no God and that all there is the natural world, a nation built on a system that wanted to eradicate Christianity and all religion, would break up on the day we celebrate the greatest miracle of all - the birth of the Son of God - the Incarnation - God becoming flesh. Doesn't God have a sense of humor?

And when I think of the fact that the break-up of the Soviet Union became official on Christmas Day, that little victory reminds me of an even greater one, the triumph of Christmas itself. Many books could be written on that simple statement. While we don't have time to go into great detail, we do have a moment to look briefly at what indeed does Christmas mean for our world and the victory God has wrought for mankind through it.

We can see it in the incredible spread of the Gospel over the last twenty years, in nations and regions like China, Ukraine, India, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Even the establishment and growth of our own nation, the United States of America is a testament to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. But why? It is because of Christmas. So then, what does this triumph entail?

**A TRIUMPH OF TRUTH**

First, Christmas is a triumph of the truth. Let's face it. Everyone in our world is looking for truth. Questions like "Why are we here?" "What is real?" "What is important in life?" "What is our purpose?" "Why do we die?" are all grounded in the quest for ultimate truth.

I am reminded of what Pontius Pilate said 2000 years ago when Jesus was brought before him for trial. As recorded in **John 18:36-38**: Jesus said, "*My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.*" Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "*You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.*" Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"

"*What is truth?*" Pilate, familiar with all the ancient philosophers and their quest for truth, didn't know. This question is still being asked by our world today. It is a fundamental question. Some contend there really is no truth, others say there are many different truths, and still others say truth is in the eyes of the beholder.

But life teaches us otherwise, and so does the Lord. You see there is truth in the physical realm and there is truth in the spiritual realm. There are two worlds – the natural and the supernatural – there are physical

laws and there are spiritual laws. Physical laws like the law of gravity do not change – it is a principle. There are physical laws which govern our natural universe. But there are also relational laws – how we are to treat one another. And while we can see these acted out they transcend nature itself. In other words, wherever you, they are true. And so it shouldn't surprise us that God has revealed that there is also a supernatural world which is likewise governed by laws that do not change. These principles and laws emanate from His Person and character.

And God the Son, Jesus Christ is the embodiment of this truth. When you see Jesus you see ultimate reality. When you see Jesus you see the truth. He is the standard. He is the beginning and the end. He is the giver and sustainer of life. Jesus said in **Jn. 14:6**, “***I am the way, the truth and the life.***” That, my friends, is the starting point to understanding our existence. And while there might be elements of God's truth in other religions, ultimately, all truth and all knowledge comes from the Lord, it flows from and through Jesus Christ.

Now if there is truth, there is also falsehood. Let me share with you the two greatest lies in our world today. The first lie is that there is no personal God. It is not just a lie that atheists believe but Hindus, Buddhists, Animists, Wiccans, and other pagan religions believe. For those who believe everyone is on the same road to heaven, I say, you can't have it both ways! There either is a personal God or there isn't? And if there isn't, then the alternative is a force, many spirits, various deities, or nothing at all.

The second lie is opposite the first but is just as false. This lie teaches that there is a personal God but His name is *Allah* and Mohammed is his prophet. According to this lie, *Allah* has no Son. In fact, for Moslems, it is an abomination to believe that *Allah* would even bother to come down to earth and take on human flesh. It is why Christians and Jews are considered infidels. My friends, some may want to sugarcoat it, but Islam is a lie. Of course, there are many sincere Moslems, many who may be worshipping God in ignorance, but they are being held in bondage – often not of their own choice. So it's not the majority of Islamic people who are the problem – it is their religion – because it is a religion not based on the Truth.

Now some may say that is being judgmental – no - being judgmental involves evaluating the heart of an individual. What we are talking about is truth verses untruth. The thing is if you base something on truth good will always prevail, because it flows from God who is of essence totally righteous pure and good. But when you look at Islam, all you have to do is look at the fruit.

I am reminded of what a fellow pastor of mine told me last week about two Iraqis that now live in Buffalo. Pastor John Schuerholz of Kenmore Alliance shared about a Iraqi man who lived in Basra. He was blind. His wife prayed to all the prophets listed in the Koran, the last prophet being Jesus. He went to bed, had a vision of a man visiting him, telling him that he would be healed. When he woke up, he could see. Excited beyond belief, he told his wife, and asked to whom she prayed. They wondered which prophet to whom they should give glory. His family told him to give glory to Mohammed the prophet. Awhile later he received a copy of the Gospel of John and he read the account of Jesus healing the blind man. He said to himself, “Mohammed never healed a blind man.” It must be Jesus! Jesus heals! He and his wife then became Christians. How did his family respond? They beat him up, three time no less! He ended up fleeing to a church in Syria and finally received asylum in the US through sponsorship by Pastor John's Church.

Then there is the story of an Omani college student here in the USA who converted to Christ. When he called to tell his father, a general in the Omani Armed Forces, he told him not to bother to come home or he will have to kill him! Bishop Atwood shared with us a couple weeks ago how 17 new converts from Islam – baptized in the Anglican Church in Bagdad, were all executed within a year of their baptisms. I can go on and on. Jesus said you will know them by their fruit.

I find it ironic that if you go to Harvard University today at one of the entrance gates you will find the words from **John 8:32** "*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.*" Seven out of the eight Ivy League Schools were begun first as either seminaries to train clergy or Christian colleges seeking to learn God's truth and His ways. How sad that now they consider such endeavors as beneath them!

Even the CIA has inscribed on the wall in the foyer of its headquarters building the words, "*You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.*" The problem is, it is taken out of context. You need to know what the preceding and following verses say! Jesus said in **Jn. 8:31,32, 36**: "*If you continue in my Word you will be My disciples and you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free...So if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed.*" So it is not truth for truth's sake, rather all truth is founded upon God's Word and the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus bears witness to the truth and is the truth. And the truth never lies – it is just the way it is. And yet, we can accept it or we can reject it. It's our choice.

### **A TRIUMPH OF LOVE**

But Christmas is not just a triumph of truth, it is also a triumph of love. Jesus was born into a Holy Family. You can't have Christmas without a family. Not only does this affirm that the family is God's creation and we must do all in our power to uphold the integrity of families in our society, it reflects the heart of God. He desires that we be in relationships and that these relationships are developed in the context of selfless love. True love gives of itself.

It is why we read in **John 3:16**: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*" God so loved that He gave. There, my friends, is the heart of true love. True love gives of itself. While one can give without loving, you can't love without giving. And that giving is to be of our very selves.

It is what transformed the Roman Empire. It is what has transformed our world over the ages. True love is selfless and humble, it is compassionate and forgiving, it is sacrificial and serving. When such things are displayed in our hearts and in our actions, we are reflecting the heart and mind of God. In other words, it is not enough to know the truth, we must respond and act out the truth in love.

And Christ shows us true love in his coming as a baby, in his life, in his death, his teachings, and his promises. It is why Jesus said in **Jn. 15:12**, "*Just as I have loved you, so you also must love one another.*"

And whenever God's love is mentioned in the Bible - we are inevitably pointed to the cross. **Romans 5:8** "*But God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.*"

And because that love was demonstrated in selfless giving it leads us to another triumph - the triumph of grace.

### **A TRIUMPH OF GRACE**

God's love and His grace go hand in hand because God's grace flows out of His love. What is grace? Grace is God's undeserved blessing and favor upon His creation. God gives it to us though we don't deserve it.

The Bible says in **Ephesians 2:8-9** "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast.*"

But the world says you have to be good first to find favor with God. We even see this at Christmas time. What happens every Christmas, all the children line up to see Santa and as the girls and boys hop on Santa's lap, Santa says, "Have you been a good little boy or girl?" And the expectation is that because they have been good they are then entitled to gifts. But what is that teaching? Their acceptance is based on their performance. What they receive is based on what they do.

Now is that the Gospel? Is God's love based on our performance? On whether we are good or bad? Absolutely not. God loves us and gives us His grace regardless. It's already there. He accepts us as His children. But do we accept Him as our Father? Are we willing to walk in His love? Are we willing to accept His grace so that we can start over. The truth is God loves us too much to allow us to stay where we're at.

And so while the world says *Do, Do, Do*. Christ says, *Done, Done, Done*. It has been done, finished on the cross. And the reason for this grace is to give us life both in the natural realm and the supernatural realm. So what we are talking about is not just a triumph of grace but a triumph of life.

### **A TRIUMPH OF LIFE**

And when it comes to life, Jesus said these words: *"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him."* (Jn. 6:54-56)

And in **Luke 22:19-20** we read, *"And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.'"*

Do you remember what happened Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? God gave them everything they needed to enjoy life. But they could not eat from the one tree in the center of the garden, tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warned them that if they ate of that tree they would die. Their life would end. Satan tempted them and rather than trust God's Word they trusted their own desires and feelings, they ate of the fruit, and everything became cursed as a result. Now what was the very thing that was at the heart of their the disobedience, eating a piece of the fruit.

The world was plunged into sin because a simply act of eating. Someone bit some fruit. We don't know what kind it was. But it was a piece of fruit. All they did was eat and all hell broke loose. They bit a piece of fruit, and death came, they bit a piece of fruit and marriage conflict came, they bit a piece of fruit and one brother killed another brother, sibling rivalry came, they bit a piece of fruit and moms would have pain in childbirth, they bit a piece of fruit, so now thorns and thistles grow, they bit a piece of fruit and now death reigned from Adam, and men would work from the sweat of their brow and not enjoy their labor, all because somebody bit a piece of fruit!

Now why did they eat? They ate because behind the fruit was the activity of the devil. The devil was behind the meal and they got devilish consequences because they were eating at the devil's table. But even with the devil and death now knocking at their door, what did God say to Eve? In **Gen. 3:15**, God promised that a descendant of Eve would crush the head of Satan, a descendant of Eve would bring life from death. You see there is another tree. It's called the cross. And on this tree the Son of God died and gave His life. His flesh and blood became the life for the whole world.

Now if the devil can have a piece of fruit that in that the act of eating it plunges our world into sin and death, how much more can the eternal Son of God can deliver to His people life, restoration, recovery, by eating his meal? What we are talking about is not just His death on the cross but the way we proclaim it to the world in Holy Communion. So it is not just chewing a wafer and drinking a cup but we are drawing down life and the spiritual repercussions. There were two trees in the garden. Adam and Eve bit from the Tree of Knowledge but not from the Tree of Life. But now we can.

The cross is our tree of life. Jesus says, I offer life, now eat from it. Holy Communion is God's ordained channel for spiritual well-being. It will do what a sermon can't do because you get to proclaim it to the spiritual realm that is bothering you. When I preach I get to talk to you. When you have communion you get to talk to the heavenly host. But you are talking to them from the position of the cross. Satan wants to keep you from the table. He doesn't want you to be connected to the Vine. You see the devil is not threatened by a sermon or a song, he is threatened by the cross. That's the only thing that threatens him.

Are you getting the picture? That which brought death into the world - the act of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has been reversed, so that now we eat from body of Christ and have life.

### **THE HOLY GRAIL**

You know I've watched all the Indiana Jones movies. The one I like best is when Indie was in search of the holy grail, when he was in search of the cup of blessing. In that movie, *the Last Crusade*, as he is in search of the holy grail there are enemies that don't want him to get it. They fight him and do everything to stop him. Finally, they shoot his father. His father is on the ground dying. And there is no way to save his life *unless* Indie can get to the cup. Now he must do some things to get to the cup. Because there are things trying to chop his head off. He must exercise great faith and step out and cross a great chasm. He has to be able to spell the name *Jehovah* right. And there are all sorts of death traps trying to keep him from the cup. Finally He crosses over to the area that has all these cups. He needs this cup because death is in his family. His father lies dying and there is nothing on earth that can save him.

There is a guardian of the grail. And then he says something, to Indiana Jones. He says, "Choose wisely." Behind him then rushes in the enemy. The enemy picks up the cup and drinks from the cup. And he turns into this hideous figure and disintegrates. And the guardian of the grail says, "He chose poorly."

Indiana Jones is looking at all these cups up there and he doesn't want to make a mistake, he wants to get the right one, he is not just getting the cup to get the cup. He's getting the cup to get the life. He is getting that cup for the life it offers, not for refreshment. He is not getting it to quench his thirst. He's getting it for life. And he looks over all the cups and he says "Which one?" "Which one?" All these cups. "Which one?" And then he remembers. Jesus was a carpenter. He worked with wood. There was only one wooden cup and he dipped it. He took it back to his father and gave it to his father and death turned into life.

Life! That is why we celebrate Christmas. Grace...Love...Truth. These all reflect the triumph of Christmas. And they are only found in Christ Jesus the Lord. Will you accept Him? Will you embrace Him? Will you walk with Him? If you haven't accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior, this is the day to do it. If you have fallen off the well beaten path of faith, this is the day to get back on. If you are encouraged and strengthened in your faith, this is the time to sing praises. Wherever you may be in your walk with the Lord, rejoice in His triumph, rejoice in the triumph of Christmas! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!