

The Light shines in the Darkness (John 1:5)

Homily, Christmas Eve+ Christmas Day

December 24 and 25, 2009

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, New York

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Not long ago I spent a few days in Antwerp, Belgium. My hotel was in the middle of the old city close by the magnificent Cathedral of Our Lady, or as the Flemish call it “Onze Lieve Vrouwe Kathedraal”, literally “Our Dear Lady Cathedral”. One of the first things I noticed upon arriving there was the regular pealing of the Cathedral’s carillon, at the quarter, at the half hour, and at the whole hour. Every fifteen minutes the clear, bright sounds of the carillon cascaded over the city and at the whole hour the sonorous sound of the big bells joined in to announce the exact hour.

I love that sound of the carillons that chime from churches in European cities. They remind us that time is hallowed, that life is a journey through time and space, and that the presence of the Holy is the backdrop against which all our human activity takes place. But I also know from living, when I was a teenager, for a number of years in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, a city with many carillons, that you can get so used to the sound of bells that you do not hear them any more. The magnificent sounds of the carillon, the booming of the big bells, fades into the background, somewhat like getting used to the sound of traffic on a nearby interstate or the sound of airplanes landing or taking off at a neighboring airport.

I was reminded of the glorious bells of the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp when I read today’s Gospel of the Incarnation, that magnificent Prologue to the Gospel of St. John. We have heard this wonderful passage so often that it becomes difficult to hear and take in the stupendous truth it conveys.

If we were asked to summarize the Christian faith, we could do no better than to recite the first 18 verses of the first chapter of St. John’s Gospel. What does the Prologue tell us? It tells us that God who is before and above and beyond all time and space, who created all that is, and upon whom all life depends for its existence, that this eternal Word became incarnate in the person of Jesus and lived among us.

It reminds us that no one has ever seen God but that Jesus has made God known to us. For in Jesus we have seen God’s glory, full of grace and truth. Jesus has revealed to us what God is like. Jesus has shown us, so to speak, the face and the speech of God. It tells us that in Jesus God’s healing and renewing life was fully present and that this Divine life is the light of all people.

It also reminds us that many people did not accept Jesus during his earthly life but that all who did receive him, who trusted him, were given the power to become children of God. And it proclaims that this life-giving light of God that was revealed in Jesus (still) shines (present tense not past tense) in the darkness and that the darkness has not overcome it (literally has not been able to master it).

2. Jesus was born at a time when the might of the great Roman Empire was at its peak. Its dominion stretched from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Tigris and

Euphrates rivers in the East, and from what is now Germany in the North to the entire area of North Africa that borders the Mediterranean in the South.

It is difficult to transport our minds back to that long ago time and it is also not at all easy to know what life was like for people back then. It *is* possible, however, on the basis of surviving documents, both pagan and Christian, to get a reasonably accurate sense of the prevailing mood of that period. No matter where one lived, what ethnic or religious group one belonged to, or what language one spoke, the general outlook of people, regardless of their station in life, appears to have been profoundly fatalistic, along the lines of “whatever will be, will be”. This actually does not sound much different from the mood of many people in our time.

It has been said that a pall of sadness hovered over that ancient world because of the little that human beings felt they could do to improve their condition or ward off ill fortune. The best one could hope for was to placate the capricious gods who might or might not be induced through sacrifice and cultic observances to bend fate somewhat to one’s benefit. If this was the disposition of those who had power, status wealth, and education, imagine how hopeless life must have seemed to those lower on the totem pole.

The Roman authorities tolerated all manner of religions and sects as long as people were willing to worship the Emperor as Supreme Lord. It was their commitment to Jesus as Supreme Lord and their refusal to worship the Emperor that got Christians into trouble and led to them being called atheists and terribly persecuted.

Not surprisingly Gnostic religions flourished in the ancient world for Gnosticism regards the created order, that is to say the physical world including human bodies, as polluted and advocates a return to our spiritual essence which is closer to the divine through the acquisition of special *gnosis* or knowledge. Gnosticism, both in its ancient and contemporary manifestations, is thoroughly dualistic and regards the flesh as bad and the spirit as good and advocates a program of leave taking from the world, of letting go of the body to let the soul be freed.

3. The Resurrection of our Lord changed all that. For the Resurrection forever validated Jesus’ revolutionary and liberating message that, as the contemporary Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has put it so cogently, “Christ’s victory –his triumph over the power of the air, the elemental spirits, the devils, death itself- had purged the natural world of its more terrifying mysteries and tamed its more impulsive spiritual agencies.”¹ Through the risen Christ salvation was possible for everyone, male or female, free or slave, rich or poor, Jew or Greek or Roman or African, because salvation was a process of liberation and restoration to what the loving Creator intended us to be.

The early Christians understood salvation, and again I am quoting Hart, “not in the rather impoverished way of many modern Christians, as a kind of extrinsic legal transaction between the divine and human by which a debt is cancelled and the redeemed soul issued a certificate of entry into the afterlife.” Rather, “they saw salvation as nothing less than a real and living union between God and his creatures. To be saved was to be joined to God himself in Christ, to be in fact ‘divinized’ –which is to say, in the words of 2 Peter 1:4, to

¹ *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* Yale University Press, 2009), 201.

become ‘partakers of the divine nature’. As St. Athanasius (d. 373) summarized this so pointedly, “God became man that man might become god.”

Following the Resurrection came the understandable desire to celebrate the occasion of Jesus’ birth, when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).” Regardless of when or where you or I were born, each one of us grew up in a Western culture that celebrates Christmas in ways that obscure the real reason why the early Christians called the birth of Jesus the “Feast of the Incarnation.” And this is why St. John spoke of the Light of Christ that shines in the darkness and that the darkness has not overcome.

The Light of Christ still shines in the darkness and the darkness will never be able to extinguish it. Let me give you an example of the Light of Christ shining in the darkness of the life of a contemporary woman. I got to know her when she was a seminary student and I am sharing this with her permission. She told me that she was severely abused in every way by close relatives when she was growing up. When still a young girl, she started going to a nearby Roman Catholic Cathedral to ask Jesus for help and to find some peace from the turmoil and maltreatment that she had to endure. She vividly remembers experiencing the protective presence of Jesus during some excruciatingly difficult moments while growing up.

In spite of what she went through, she wrote me in a letter, “I have learned to appreciate life and every moment that I am alive. I realize that there are no guarantees and that situations can change suddenly. However, my greatest gift is found in my relationship in Christ. I look at the crucifix and believe that Christ knows all my suffering because out of his innocence he was persecuted. I know that he came to change the world and that meant changing the rules.

There are many nights that I make my way over ... to the nearest sanctuary ... to pray and I bow my face to the ground before the cross. I know that it is there that God met me in my suffering. There will be no place that I will walk where he was not walked before me. There are hours that I sit in the pew, laying my head back and letting myself become completely empty. My mind is clear and my body is limp. I have become self-emptied so that whatever God needs to fill me with can be done. It is then that I can feel all that God has for me filling up inside of me. It is such peace that often times I can feel tears rolling from my cheeks. It is such saving grace!”

She ended by saying, “It has been a long journey, but I can say that I have never known such a love like that from Christ who knows all suffering and loves unconditionally. I remember the words of St. Paul, ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me (Gal. 2:20).’” The experience of this woman witnesses in a powerful way to the healing and saving presence of the Light of Christ in our lives.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, this Light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never be able to overcome it. One of our main responsibilities at Grace Church is to reflect that Light of Christ in all that we do here to those inside and outside the parish. As we celebrate once again the glorious Feast of the Incarnation, I invite you to recommit yourselves to this holy calling. **Amen.**