



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 27, 2020
First Sunday After Christmas Day

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Andrew St. John, *Bishop in Residence*
on
Isaiah 61:10–62:3; Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7; and John 1:1-18
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The First Sunday After Christmas Day

It being the third day of Christmas I can very correctly wish you all a “Merry Christmas”. I need hardly remind you that we are within the Twelve Days of Christmas which began on December 25 and ends on the Eve of the Epiphany, Twelfth Night. At least in normal times we go on singing all the Christmas carols and hymns and hearing some great passages of scripture associated with the Incarnation in the readings. And we can enjoy the crèche and make our devotions at it. In a way the 12 days have become somewhat counter cultural given that for the commercial and popular world Christmas Day is not the beginning of the feast of Christmas but the end. On my way here this morning I noted the several tired, wilted Christmas trees out with the trash on the sidewalk. Some of you will remember a time when the singing of carols and the decorating of church for Christmas waited until Christmas Eve. I still remember my surprise as a young curate in London in the early Seventies attending one of the three carol services at Westminster Abbey held on the three feast days after Christmas Day. Likewise, the Christmas tree was never trimmed before Christmas Eve. But those battles have largely been lost in much of the Western church. As hard as we try it is difficult to maintain the integrity of late Advent in face of the popular demand for Christmas celebrations before the holidays begin. But for those of us who can keep the Twelve Days of Christmas we can do so with few competing demands. My advice is to keep your decorations and cards up until Epiphany; play your favorite Christmas music including the splendid recordings of our own choir; and continue your Christmas correspondence and contact with friends. For Christmas is good news: it is about God with us; the hope of glory! And this year of all years we need good news to cheer us and uplift us.

At the heart of our Christmas celebration is the crèche: the manger scene at Bethlehem; reminding us of the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph long ago. The crèche as such was developed by St Francis of Assisi in the Twelfth Century. But the place of Jesus’ birth at Bethlehem has been a holy site since earliest times. The current Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem was built by the Emperor Justinian in the Sixth Century AD over a shrine erected by the Emperor Constantine in the Fourth Century AD. But those structures only point to the fact that that site was a holy place, a place of pilgrimage, from even earlier times. I have visited Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity several times; it is the sort of place that grows on you. The first-time visitor can be shocked at the commercialism that attends this and most holy places the world over; and Bethlehem is no exception; as well as by the fact that Bethlehem is a major tourist destination; it can be crowded and noisy. And then there is the fact that Bethlehem is a very middle-eastern city and one that has been occupied by Israel since the 1968 War as it was occupied in the time of Jesus. So it is not a particular neat and tidy place nor the shrine at the birth place especially tasteful to the Western eye. In fact the shrine is in a rather dark, dank cave or grotto below the church for in Eastern tradition Jesus was born in a cave, or cave like shelter carved out of the limestone rock which abounds in the region. Eastern iconography always

shows the Nativity in a cave rather than a manger. On my first visit I was with an ecumenical clergy group from Australia led by a wonderful Jewish rabbi. Among the Christians were some fine Baptists who however demonstrated a certain naiveté at the holy places. As we gathered in the cramped space in the shrine of the birth place marked by a silver star in the floor of the grotto which is filled with silver oil lamps the smoke from which had turned the walls of the space black, one of the Baptists said with an air of disappointment that this was not what he had expected (not like the images on Christmas cards or the illustrations in children's Bibles, thought I). One of my Anglican priest friends snapped back: "Kneel down and pray for God's sake; this is where Jesus was born."

The shrine at Bethlehem is a holy place, one of those "thin" places, where heaven and earth appear to meet.

But interestingly enough the focus of our worship especially in the readings and in other commemorations soon moves on from the crèche scene. In fact it is only on Christmas Eve that the Matthew gospel of the shepherds and the manger birth is read. Today for instance as on Christmas Day the gospel is from John's Prologue, which lacks any of the detail of Matthew and Luke about the Bethlehem birth. John proclaims as part of an overarching theology "that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." And Paul in the Galatians passage read as the Epistle makes his only reference to Jesus' birth, "God sent his own Son, born of a woman, born under the law" again without anything more specific. The point I wish to make is that as important as the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are, they are only part of the whole sweep of Salvation History. It is often said that the Gospels were written from the perspective of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. One commentator speaks of the Gospels as constructed as Passions with long introductions. The whole "Jesus Story" only becomes significant because of Jesus' Death and Resurrection and Exaltation into Heaven. When you think of it certain places only become significant because of the fame of people born there. So Independence, Missouri, and Hope, Arkansas, for instance gained a certain fame as being the birthplaces of Presidents Truman and Clinton. That is not to denigrate the crèche or Bethlehem; to the contrary. But we need to beware of that sort of religion that gets stuck in the manger as it were; that gets too caught up with the baby and the sentimental scene of his birth, and somehow resists allowing the child born to actually grow up! As any parent knows the wonder and joy of a new birth, the popping of champagne corks and the lighting of cigars, is soon translated into keeping up with the feeding regime, changing diapers and sleepless nights. But the gospels don't let us get away with avoiding the full reality of this Jesus whose birth we so rightly celebrate. Matthew moves on to the Magi, the Flight into Egypt, and the massacre of the Innocents at Bethlehem. Luke relates the Naming and Circumcision and then the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple as well as the only account of the Boyhood of Jesus. They allow for the baby to grow up.

But they also weave into the story hints of what is to come; that this Jesus will attract opposition; that he will endure pain and suffering. The massacre of the Innocents is stark reminder of what is to come. Simeon's prophecy foretells the pain Mary will suffer through her son. In Luke the boy Jesus in the Temple causes his parents grief and misunderstanding. These are examples of the basic premiss that the gospels are written in reverse; in other words they tell the story of our Salvation from beginning to end.

John in his wonderful Prologue says it all. He begins at the beginning, at Creation itself and using the image of the Word of God, the expression of God's very self, who is incarnated or enfleshed in the person and work of Jesus, in whom "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, and from whom "we have all received, grace upon grace."

Thanks be to God for Jesus, the Incarnate God, born of Mary at Bethlehem, who is our Lord and Savior, and the Redeemer of the World.