

### *The Paradox of Christmas*

(From the Christmas Day Second Gospel: *Luke ii.1.*, and the Holy Innocents Gospel, *Matthew 11:13*)

#### The First Sunday after Christmas

**Luke 2:8** *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

**Matthew 2:16** *Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, 18 In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.*

It seems to me that if the celebration of Christmas is all idyll --peace, joy, and lots of presents and songs--, the way it is commercially represented, something is desperately wrong with it. But on the contrary, if Christmas is fraught, as it is for many, only with sadness and difficult memories, stress and unfulfilled longings, something utterly important and helpful has been completely missed!

It is a season paradoxically filled with pain and poignancy, along with hope and rejoicing, intense emotions that run the entire gamut of human experience. Sometimes the pain is made greater for us by the intensity of the celebration. We feel we simply cannot join in on the praise and worship, if our hearts are made heavy through personal experience. A very high bar seems to be set by the anticipation of the holiday. For those caught up in the web of difficulty, the prospect of the joyful carols, the gift giving, the sense that something very good is happening somewhere, to someone, creates an almost impossible tension. I hear the conversations on the city buses I drive, people wincing in pain at the approach of Christmastime, and breathing a phenomenal sigh of relief once the ordeal is past! They are not alone, however. Most of us find the Holidays to be this same strangely peculiar mix.

These contrasts are readily apparent even in the songs themselves. Think of the almost physical burden felt when we sing the slow, minor-key "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel", versus the elation of "Joy to the World!". Consider the words and melody of *The Coventry Carol*, which commemorates the death of the "Holy Innocents", a day set aside in our Prayer Book for special attention on December 28<sup>th</sup>:

*1. Lully, lullay, Thou little tiny Child,  
Bye, bye, lully, lullay.  
Lullay, thou little tiny Child,  
Bye, bye, lully, lullay.*

*2. O sisters too, how may we do,  
For to preserve this day  
This poor youngling for whom we do sing  
Bye, bye, lully, lullay.*

*3. Herod, the king, in his raging,  
Charged he hath this day  
His men of might, in his owne sight,  
All young children to slay.*

*4. That woe is me, poor Child for Thee!  
And ever mourn and sigh,  
For thy parting neither say nor sing,  
Bye, bye, lully, lullay.*

Today's sermon attempts to peer behind the reality of these two apparently very contradictory experiences associated with the coming of our Savior. They are seen in the two texts I have chosen for illustration: in the Christmas Day Gospel we read of *good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people*, while in the Gospel of the Holy Innocents we find *a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning...* Why should it be this way?

We as believers are privy to a truth completely unknown to a world which is evermore geared to the delivering of lots of pleasure at the least possible inconvenience. Why be bothered, they cry, with the sort of rigor associated with the words of a well-known song you may remember from the movie, *The Sound of Music*?:

*1. Climb every mountain,  
Search high and low,  
Follow every byway,  
Every path you know.*

*2. Climb every mountain,  
Ford every stream,  
Follow every rainbow,  
'Till you find your dream.*

*3. A dream that will need  
All the love you can give,  
Every day of your life  
For as long as you live.*

Why be bothered, when one can access hundreds of TV channels, or slip on a pair of headphones, or surf the internet, or pop a pill? But the experience of Christmas teaches us that the greatest joys only come with the greatest price. There can be no access to the triumph and victory of the Redemption Story which began on Christmas Day, without participation in the suffering that marks every inch of the roadway that leads us there. The Savior's arrival is announced to human ears that are barely able to overcome their fear with faith. A poor woman endures the disgrace of an unplanned pregnancy that others simply cannot understand. A foster-father flees the country with his little family, barely escaping an insane infanticide that destroys a town's next generation. The Son of God, sent from Heaven to save all men, grows up to become the Man of Sorrows, enduring the hardheartedness and rejection of his family, his town, his nation, who will finally conspire to deliver Him to a shameful death. His resurrection from the death is pooh-

poohed as a lie and a plot by His followers. And the preaching of the Church is everywhere opposed and made light of. And so it continues to this very day. Christian hearts are broken by a world which has no time nor interest in the Gospel message. Whatever good the Church may have wrought in the world through its institutions, its charity, its witness, seems destined for ruin.

We suffer because of sin. It is the chief legacy of the world. It has spoiled everything. It separates men from God, men from each other, and even men from themselves. It is the chief cause of sadness. No tear has ever fallen independently of it. No minor-key melody has ever been created apart from it. There is no earthly narrative, be the fact ever so carefully hidden, that has remained uninfluenced by it.

So why are the angels singing to the shepherds? What are they talking about? Where indeed are the *good tidings of great joy*, when the *lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning* appear to have won the day? Here is why: Christmas joy is entirely dependent upon faith, and faith alone! It is faith in God's promise that is the bridge between suffering and fulfillment. Faith sustained Mary and Joseph when terribly adverse and dangerous circumstances urged them to conclude otherwise. The Savior *endured the cross, despising the shame*, because of faith in *the joy that was set before Him* (from Hebrews 12). The Church which yet suffers as it bears the message of the Gospel, in faith "waits the consummation of peace forevermore", as the hymn proclaims ("The Church's One Foundation"). It is faith that has always kept the people of God walking through the alien terrain of a world which hates and rejects the Gospel light, meeting the kindness of God with contempt and mockery, to its own tragic destruction.

This is the heart of Christmas: faith in the message of the angels, even while sin continues to wreak destruction among a group of innocent children. It is faith that carries us up past the heartaches that seem so attendant with the Holidays, and unites us with the hosts of heaven which await us at the end of our own journeys through this life. It is the same faith that illuminates your face, and mine, in the midst of the darkness, and so affects our actions, that others are drawn to this same Christ, whose life began in difficulty, but also with a grand proclamation of much, much better things to come. It is faith that solves the paradox of Christmas, and somehow unites the saddest of songs and tunes with the brightest and most joyful of hymns that could ever brighten the day.

*And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

*"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (From Matthew 1)*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*