



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 24 December 2007
Title: **"Christ the Savior is Born....Now What?"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings:

First Reading Isaiah 9:2-4,6-7
Second Reading Titus 2:11-14
Gospel Luke 2:1-20

A famous rabbi, and not the one featured in "Fiddler on the Roof" I might add, once wrote an article entitled "Being a Jew at Christmas Time." He commented, "There is nothing wrong with sleigh bells, Bing Crosby, and Christmas pudding, but I should hope Christians would want more than just that, and as Christmas becomes more and more secularized, I am not sure they get it." He went on, "In the end, the problem of Christmas is not mine any more than Christmas itself is. The real Christmas challenge belongs to Christians: how to take Christmas out of the secularized public domain and move it back into the religious sphere once again."

Many people would agree with that. They would protest at the way in which Christmas becomes less concerned with "Amahl and the Night Visitors" and more focused on "Any Mall and Thousands of Shoppers." In fact, complaining about the secularization of the holiday has become one of the seasonal traditions: the signs that the villages put up saying "Jesus is the Reason for the Season." That's in the Philippines. In the U.S., it's more pronounced: Christians in local communities go to court to force their municipalities to restore the Nativity Scenes that political correctness have removed.

But it isn't city hall or even the barangay that should be charged with saving Christmas from secularism. The holiday ought to be celebrated in the church and in the home. We begin with making sure that the church doesn't lose its grasp of what Christmas is all about, and in turn that empowers and encourages families to maintain a semblance of sanctity about this holiday.

However, it has been argued, and with some truth I believe, that the battle is already lost. The Birth of Jesus is only one aspect of this festival, and one that is increasingly a sidebar to the other aspects of "the Holidays": the parties, the gifts, the travel to the beach. When religion is added to this mix, it only embarrasses many people- it reminds them of things they "ought not to have done" and of beliefs that they are proud to have rejected as they became "responsible adults". Thus it is that the Baby Jesus story is only one of many told to children at this time of year, and most are probably more impressed by flying reindeer than angels, particularly since wise men bring gifts to only one child, not those all over the world. No contest there!

In the midst of this, those who are gathering in traditional Christian churches this evening are confronted by something quite different. Beyond the carols and even the Gospel from Luke, the central act of worship here tonight will have very little to do with the story most would identify with Christmas. Instead, we will commemorate a man's last meal with his friends, his death on a cross and his resurrection to new life. The Little Drummer Boy is not to be found in that at all, and there's nary a mince pie in sight.

When I was much younger and just getting active in the church, I wondered why Christmas Eve in church wasn't more seasonal. Why wasn't there some other rite we could use to celebrate the beginning of the Jesus story rather than one that concentrated only on its tragic end? Couldn't we at least use eggnog and cookies rather than bread and wine? Communion was such a bummer in the midst of holiday cheer.

I no longer ask that question. There have been too many awful Christmases- too much disappointment, too much nostalgia gone bad over the years. And I have

learned the wisdom of the Christian tradition in reminding us of the whole story of Jesus, not just the first chapter. Christmas is much, much younger as a Christian holiday than Good Friday and Easter. And the central act of Christian worship has virtually always been focused on the more ancient cycle of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. That forms the majority of all of the Gospel accounts- one-quarter to one-half in fact- not shepherds and wise men. Christmas celebrated without reference to the events of Easter is too easily to sentimentalize and make secular. A baby in a manger, angels hovering overhead, cattle lowing nearby- that is a happy, Christmas card world that needs no redemption. Without the Christian Church "doing its thing" to remind people of the cross in addition to the manger, we are subject to the ultimate seasonal deception: the yearly heresy that says that with enough good will and warm feelings, humanity can save itself. In fact, we are told by every Christmas special on TV, all we really need is to keep Christmas cheer alive all through the year and everything, *everything* will be alright.

Yes, Easter is harder than Christmas to deal with, for it requires facing death in addition to birth. It makes us face the shortcomings of the disciples (and ourselves), and the desperate, bloody lengths to which God must to in order to rescue the world from itself. It reminds us, in other words, not only of the fact of Jesus' birth, but also its purpose. And that is something quite different than what Hallmark cards might have you believe is "the reason for the season."

As we continue with our celebration here this evening, please note that before the traditional punch and cookies on the church lawn, we will share a quite different and even more ancient menu here inside. The words we say will have little to do with snow or nostalgia, but a whole lot to do with life, death and eternity. It is that, my friends, which will not only last the whole year, but your whole life.

Yes, Christmas traditions, Christmas carols, Christmas cheer is a fond and wonderful thing. But remember that even the word for the holiday contains the ultimate truth- Christ-mass- the "Christ Mass"- sacrament of Christ's passion, death and resurrection – that is the reason for this and any other season.

