

SPG#118, Christmas 1C

December 31, 2006 -- Fr. Charles Pope

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

We are now engaged in the season of Christmas, Christmastide in the church year.

But it will be observed that the character and nature of that church year celebration varies from year to year via the calendar. The Prayer Book allows for up to two Sundays after Christmas, followed by a Sunday to celebrate the Epiphany. But this year, since Ash Wednesday comes so quickly, February 21, there is only one Sunday after Christmas, today, and then Epiphany on January 7. That means that the feast days that are clustered around Christmas, the Feast of Holy Innocents on December 28, the feast of the Holy Name on January 1, and the Epiphany on January 7 all occur within ten days of each other. And so we have many feast days that are compressed into a relatively short time.

When one looks at the calendar when there are two Sundays after Christmas, the parade of feast days can appear confusing then, and especially when there is only one Sunday after Christmas. Add to that current events in the world, the death and funeral of Gerald Ford, and the execution of Saddam Hussein, and that sense of compression, of many things occurring at once, is just intensified. For those who are interested, you could add all the football mania around New Year's Day that occurs.

In all of these prominent occurrences one can discern the call to unpack and sort out, to see behind events and frenetic activity.

Beneath the events of society there is a meaning of Christmas that invites our attention and our reflection. That central meaning is there for us to appreciate and enjoy every day of the year, not just in December. And to do that I think we are called again to Bethlehem, to the inn and the

manger. And from our standpoint of many events, to approach Bethlehem again may seem like going on spiritual vacation.

In exploring the background of the birth, it is important to note an important tenet of the ancient world. And that is their version of the trickle down theory. That means that if the collective, the nation or the country, fared well, then the families and individuals within its borders also fared well. The Psalmist cries: “Worship the Lord, O Jerusalem, praise your God, O Zion; for he has strengthened the bars of your gates; he has blessed your children within you.” In addition, geographically, Israel as a land mass was situated between two larger land masses to the north and south and 1 more to the east. If Israel as a country was secure, if her leaders were strong, then the inhabitants were secure as well. The favorite monarch of 1st century Israel was King David who, in his time, brought unprecedented prosperity and security to the land. Is it any wonder that people longed for such a presence again? Is it any wonder that they longed for the security and comfort that came from such a presence? It would have been easy for a typical Jew in 1st century Israel to look for and anticipate the return of such a presence.

And it would have been easy for any one person to think of this person as a Messiah. And it would have been easy for people to expect that this Messiah David-like figure would bring unprecedented prosperity, strength, and security, just like before.

But God turned the tables on that prevalent expectation. Because there was no military hero who appeared as their Messiah. Far from prevailing expectations the Baby Jesus came as a surprise. And yet, perhaps not a total surprise. For, within the tradition of Judaism was the birth of Isaac

in the Old Testament. The birth of Isaac, who was born to an aging Sara, was not supposed to happen. It was unexpected. And yet Isaac became known as a miracle child, a child of promise. And so, when Jesus was born, when the “Word became flesh,” born of a virgin, it was not supposed to happen. And yet it did.

And the presence of the angels and the star indicated that this indeed was the hoped for Messiah. The trickle down theory was swept aside. In the Word become flesh no longer was God simply Caretaker and Lawgiver. In the birth of Jesus he became more our Parent. Anyone had access to God, simply by choice. Whereas before we were servants of God, in the birth of Jesus we became sons and daughters. As Paul says to the Galatians in today’s epistle, “God has sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, ‘Abba! Father.’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” Not only did we have access to God. Now everyone could actually know God as an individual. Where there had been servanthood, there was now relationship.

So, in the year of Jesus birth, around 4 BCE, the people groped and struggled with their own expectations and with the Christian era that had just begun..

And if the birth of Jesus was not enough, then the life and teachings of the man Jesus underscored again and again who he was and what had happened.

In our own times, in Christmas of 2006, in a similar way, we struggle with our own expectations of who Jesus is and what his presence means in our lives. We live in the midst of other

happenings, of the letdown after Christmas Day, of our team scoring a touchdown, of big savings due to a massive sale, of the new year. And in all of the buzz it may be easy to forget that God wants to know each of us, that he not only wants our worship of him, but our relationship with Him. That he not only wants a servant, but a friend.

And so I think it is before Christians who live in our times to insert quiet reminders into our lives that Christ is born, that God desires relationship with each of us and all of us.

I have found that the Christmas season after Christmas Day is a very delicate season.

It is easily forgotten and swept away by other pursuits. And in fact there is much in our Christian lives that is quiet and delicate, that needs our attention and our intention, or it is missed.

Out in the fields that night while the shepherds were watching sheep the angels sang in a marvelous chorus. And I have at times thought that it was appropriate that the angels did not sing around the manger. For Mary may have come out and said, "You all knock it off, the baby is trying to sleep."

In Bethlehem, in the manger, as the Hope of the world was born, it was a quiet and delicate night. And in our hearts his birth is quiet and delicate. So quiet and delicate that we who worship him regularly, need reminders. Because a very important part of our Christian lives is quiet and delicate.

And so as we huddle around the Child in the manger with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the animals, let us remind ourselves that it was for us that he came, in all times and in all events. When we are reminded, when we know again that the Child is born, then we can revel in his quiet and delicate warmth in our hearts. If we are quiet enough, we will discern a joy that is deep enough and big enough for the whole world. And we will discern an astonishing silent and holy night within. And perhaps we will discern that the silence, the holiness, and the joy are not just to be celebrated on December 25. Rather we are to take that Bethlehem with us into life, into executions, funerals, frenetic schedules, and all manner of challenges. When we do take the silent and holy night into the world, may it be that we will hear the still small voice that whispers "Christ is born." Amen.