

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Christmas I

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It is generally believed that God is in heaven, and that if we are able to work our way to heaven we can find God. For this reason, we become self-absorbed with the prospects of the likely meeting of God in heaven-wherever heaven is. As genuine as our intentions and efforts may be, we often place so much stock on the desire to find God in heaven than finding God among us. The reality however, is, it is not in heaven that we find God, it is in God that we find heaven. And so our first act should be one of finding the God who lies peacefully in a manger, the God whose love is present in the least as well as the greatest, and in every moment.

Unlike the three gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke which either begin with the birth narratives or the baptism of Jesus, John begins his gospel by invoking the same language we read in Genesis. John recognizes the importance of Jesus's presence as the beginning of a new creation. To John, what the law was unable to produce, as little as it could save us, Christ was able to offer that. And so the Word which was instrumental in the first creation is the same Word which is now realized in human flesh. For John then, the principal argument is one in which a re-created or a mended world, where the desire will first be to find God among humans, has been made possible through the action of the Word living among us.

St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians recounts the new status which we have received as a result of Christ's presence among us. The law with its demand became the destruction of all because the people could not do what the law demanded. They only learned to recognize their sin through the law. But Christ became the law's destruction because He was all that the law demanded of its adherents.

That explains why Paul views the law as emblematic of the old creation; the new creation which John invokes is one where those who by faith welcome the God who comes to us as a little child lying in a manger, are adopted as children of God. As a result, those who have been adopted as children and joint heirs with Christ are no longer under the law nor are they subjected to the disciplinary nature of the law because they are now justified by faith.

John wasn't shy to alert us in his prologue that not everyone accepted the gift of a new creation, the powerful who were invested in manipulating the people for their own benefit mostly did not accept the gift of Jesus. The high and mighty for whom the subjugation of the lowly and powerless was lucrative, mostly did not accept the gift of Jesus. The religious leaders who benefited from the ignorance of those who knew close to nothing did not accept him. For all these people who did not accept the gift of a new creation, the debate was as much intellectual as it was about the relevance of those social and religious structures which had held the society together.

The same debate continues to rage on within our society, where no other time of the year attracts so much intellectual scrutiny over the story of Christmas. Some not only consider the story to be mythical, and yet celebrate Christmas-go figure, but because the story doesn't measure up to their level of scrutiny, they reject the story with the same venom as the Pharisees of old.

I read an article by Chris Arnade in The Guardian newspaper. Chris is an atheist who recounts his life as leaving his town, earning a PhD in physics and working on Wall Street for twenty (20) years before leaving to work with homeless addicts in South Bronx. He assumed that the people with whom he will be working with will be cynical about faith as he was, rather he found something completely different.

He came to realize that those who lived on the margins of society, those for whom society has not been particularly kind or compassionate, those who have been subjected to an economic system driven by greed, those who were always a step closer to death or harm, were more hopeful and faithful, than those who sat in the safety of their offices engaging in the luxury of atheism.

After having observed the homeless addicts display the symbols of faith, he argued among others that the homeless addicts among whom he worked had faith because the object of their belief doesn't judge them. And so if God doesn't judge them, his question then was, who was he to tell them that the object of their belief is irrational? Who was he to tell them that the one thing that offered hope in the midst of their ravaging despair is unfounded? Arden adds that in fact being in the real world reminded him that life isn't rational, and that we all make mistakes...just as the Bible argues that we are all sinners, but in as much as the addicts do understand this, many successful people have become numbed to human fallibility because of their sense of entitlement and emotional distance.

Arden concludes that he saw atheism for what it really is: an intellectual belief accessible to those who have done well. If he saw in Richard Dawkins a hero, now he sees him as someone who is so removed from humanity and the ambiguity of life that he finds himself judging those who dare to think differently.

Faith is not an intellectual exercise, if it were, only knowledgeable people like the Pharisee and Sadducees who hounded Jesus to death would be able to effectively practice it, but it is not. And our Christian faith does not lend itself to apprehension but to action.

We are not supposed to understand Christianity, rather we are to embrace Christianity's unique character of answering, because the answers we get from our questions imprisons us in the task of action. A pure unadulterated action whose every deed is holy, because that action springs out of a love that fulfills the law.

Whatever your belief is, I need you to appreciate that Christmas is a love story. It is a love story about a God whose presence among us offers confidence in the hope of a fulfillment of creation beyond this present heaven and earth. It is the story of A God whose presence among us not only helps us to recognize others, but enables us to conceive God as One who recognizes other realities as we do, and who chooses that they should exist.

Chris Arden would say that even in the darkest places of our lives, the light which Christ brings into the world overcomes that darkness by offering an abiding hope. The story of Christmas is a love story which is so deeply grounded in human nature, and for that reason, we do not have to look outside ourselves in order to find God; buried deep within all human reality is the presence of a God who first came to us as a little child. And to seek and find this God in a child, a youth, an adult, an addict, the homeless and those on the margins, is to be in heaven. Merry Christmas. Amen.

