

The Nativity of Our Lord

Heb. or Titus

John 1 or Luke 2

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

I wish I could hear what brings each of you to be participating in this evening either in person or by distance. It seems pretty likely that it isn't due to you wanting a lecture on the intricacies of Lucan theology, or that there are not myriad other demands on your time. I have been pondering tonight's worship a lot; not just intellectually, but at a much deeper place in my spirit. What I have discovered is something urgent. It is a need to have the experience and a moment of **adoration**. We speak of adoring our children or a spouse or something truly beautiful in the world, and what we mean by that word is that we take effusive joy in connecting with and being lifted up by the object of our adoration. The experience is like that of a kiss where soul to soul we participate in the life of another. And I think that to adore is to be filled with life rather than death, courage rather than fear. It is to be lifted away from myself to something greater and transcendent.

The Gospel story of the Nativity is simply full of images we recall and know well. There is Caesar, a census, Nazareth and Bethlehem (House of Bread), swaddling clothes, shepherds and angels, a manger, all familiar. But at its heart the message that rings most of all is "Do not be afraid"! It is not just the fright of the shepherds at an encounter with a heavenly host that is addressed, but the plight of humans across the ages when life has frankly become too much. The most frequent message in all of Scripture is, "Do not be afraid". The Psalmist reflects it, John tells us that love cast out fear, and Jesus in calming the storm and coming to the disciples after the resurrection offers it. There are over 365 such exhortations or prayers in holy Writ, because fear robs us of what God offers, LIFE and LIGHT.

The hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" has a striking strophe—"the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight". We have come to celebrate, to gaze, to ponder, and most of all to adore what God is bringing into our world. And we recognize the beauty of this night because it is in contrast to far too much of what we have known over the past year. The nourishing of our faith by the gift of Christmas, Christ's Mass, is precisely because it stands out against the darkness we also experience.

The juxtaposition of fear verses hope, death verses life, darkness verses light, Jesus and Caesar has been the grist for artists and writers and poets across ages. I recently revisited a couple of Shakespeare's plays, King Lear and Hamlet. If you have read either of them, you know they are tragedies and neither ends joyfully. The plots have to do with political intrigue, betrayal, moral failures, revenge and in general manage to encompass all the brokenness of the human heart and are meant to demonstrate what darkness in the soul brings about. When we look back across the months of 2020 there is much to ponder and some of this looks like the hand of Bard of Avon writing once again. We have all been impacted in some way by this dreadful pandemic which has cut us off from normal interactions. We have seen economic upheaval as well as political intrigue which has the potential to undercut trust and lead to disenchantment. We do know about fear and loss of courage. But, I was also struck by a set of verses in Hamlet spoken by Marcellus in reference to Christmas. "Some say that ever against that season, Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated, The bird of dawning singeth all night long; And then, they say, no spirit dare stir

abroad. The nights are wholesome; No fairy takes, no witch hath power to harm, SO HALLOWED AND GRACIOUS IS THIS TIME!”

It is exactly into the dreariest of places and circumstances that God selects to enter human conditions as a person in order to bring light and life. It is so striking and almost humorous that Caesar is called “Augustus”—“the venerable or the increaser”, and Luke proclaims that this little child, born to parents of no significance to the empire becomes the one who increases the whole of creation by his life, death, and resurrection. This world which God created had become hostile to both God and God’s creatures, and so he comes into it in a manger, not a palace, to capture it once again. The most-free man in that world, Augustus, representing the high and mighty, is undone by a child. C.S. Lewis commented that Jesus entered the world anonymously and clandestinely as a baby, hidden from the Roman Empire, because he was a warrior having to slip quietly behind enemy lines. His reason for coming was not to produce a nice story we visit each December, but to fight to the death the kingdom of death and darkness, and in doing so to claim us.

St. Luke tells us that the infant Jesus is placed in a manger. This is the opposite of what would be called ‘the good life’ as represented by Caesar. But it signals to us ‘the real life’ that God offers. The manger is a feeding trough where nourishment is provided, and without which life cannot be sustained. What does this story mean for us? I think we come to the Creche to adore the one who said, “I am the light of the world...I am the resurrection and the life...I am the living water...I am the Bread of Life...I Am.” We come to adore and to have Christ laid in the manger of our hearts and to sing of God’s peace in a fear-filled world, we come to be conjoined with Jesus who shares our life so that we might share his. We adore the mystery.

St. Basil the Great wrote, “Let us strive to comprehend the mystery. The reason God in in the flesh is to kill the death that lurks there. As diseases are cured by medicines and assimilated by the body, as darkness in a house is dispersed by the coming of light, so death, which held sway over human nature, is done away with by the coming of God. How great is God’s goodness, how deep his love for us! Let us join the shepherds in giving glory to God, let us dance with the angels and sing: Today a Saviour has been born to us; he is Christ the Lord. This feast belongs to the whole of creation. Let our voices too ring out in songs of jubilation.” Come let us adore him. Amen+