

December 24, 2008, 7:30 p.m.

**Christmas Eve (Year B)**

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector*

Think about shepherds for a moment. Shepherds were not really the type of people that you wanted hanging around immediately after giving birth. Once memorably described as the 'bikers of the ancient world', shepherds were generally a dirty and disreputable lot who lived on the margins of society when they weren't out in the fields. On the other hand Mary and Joseph were not exactly in mainstream circumstances themselves, were they? Relegated to a stable, probably more of a cave, laying their baby in a feed trough, the Holy Family were not in any position to complain about the riff raff. As St. Luke has it, the glad tidings of great joy were announced to those on the margins, those excluded and victimized and even feared by polite society. In part the good news is that we neither have to be victimized, nor do we have to create victims as a new way of living is opened up to us in the life and in the death of this child.

St. Matthew tells us something similar with his visit of the Magi, the sages of the East for they represent the whole world and mean that *every* person will be blessed by the child born under a star this night. More than that, Matthew shows at the very beginning how the outcast is treated. Mary is saved from stoning as an unmarried pregnant woman only by the intervention of an angel directive Joseph to marry her. And Jesus is also saved from Herod who would massacre a whole class of people – gays or Jews or blacks or firstborn children in his fear and rage at a threat to his power. Matthew tells us that Jesus is saved by his flight into Egypt, the land bearing the memory of oppression for the people amongst whom this child is born.

Perhaps it is John who tells it most like it is. *He came to his own and his own knew him not.* This child was to be an outsider, ripe for both threatening the power structures of the day and taking the blame for the state of the world, even though this birth was the birth of a real and holy and life-giving hope for the whole world. He took on the sin of the world in the way in which we live as though we need to be afraid, the ways in which we compare ourselves to others or fear loss of status or loss of face or any of the other things that make us worry. And when we worry we all too often try and feel better at the expense of someone else, -- and *that* is the root of all violence. None of us are immune from being victimized and none of us are incapable of victimizing others. We are shepherds and we are royalty both, and the glad tidings of great joy are for all of us.

We can recognize how easy it is to create victims or outsiders in the most mundane of exchanges. If you have ever opened a present at Christmas and thought immediately about how you didn't spend nearly that much on the person who gave you this extravagant gift, then you know how pervasive is that tendency

we have to compare ourselves to one another. You know how easy it is to feel aggrieved, perhaps, as though the other has done something to make you feel bad, blaming him or her a little. Before long it is all too easy to create an alliance that will have the effect of putting that person outside your circle. "Oh good grief, look what she's done now. I swear that woman has more money than sense." We laugh. A little collusion, however affectionately said, and however much born out of embarrassment. And that, right there, is the kind of world in which Jesus refused to participate and which made him vulnerable to becoming the victim himself at every turn.

So the story of Christmas points toward the rest of the story, the story of our being trapped in and by a mechanism that is born in anxiety and dis-ease and which creates violence and victims. We call this the sin of the world, and we say that this child was to die for the sin of the world, both as a consequence of living with absolute integrity and as a way of making it possible for us to begin to live free of being trapped by such mechanisms.

The story of Christmas points not only to the problem but also to the solution by reminding us that the key to the story is God's grace: the unmerited, unearned, utterly gratuitous gift of God that is the beginning of all life. *In the beginning was the Word...* says John, and later *God so loved the world that he gave his Son...* (3:16) Jesus is the gift that opens the door to a new way of living founded on gratitude for all that is entrusted to our care and all that sustains our life.

I was talking to a friend the other day who had been through a treatment program for addiction who told me that he was unprepared for what he called 'spiritual awakening' and this awakening was, for him, marked by the most unexpected sense of gratitude. He was grateful that his family had not abandoned him, grateful that he had a job to go to each day, grateful to be alive. My friend's awakening was the awakening of a reasonable and holy hope and it was marked, above all, by gratitude. And it is that same sense of gratitude that can be the antidote to fear for all of us. Many of you have heard me say before that when I am feeling pinched or tight or afraid, --when I am caught up in comparing myself with others or worried that I won't have enough of something,-- in those times I find it helpful to make a gift, to act in gratitude for what has been entrusted to me and to share it: a few dollars to a man on the street, a check to a charity, a bigger tip than would be normal. It is amazing what acts of gratitude can do to help us live in a way that combats all those fears that lead to separation and violence. *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us* or grant us gratitude for your gift of life as we show our gratitude in acts of generosity to others.

In a little while we will sing of the hopes and fears of all the years meeting in the child whose birth we mark this night. Our hope is for a life freed from fear and our fear is the progenitor of violence and victimization. Gratitude is both the fruit of real hope and the antidote to fear and we see the seeds of that truth in the Christmas story, the glad tidings of great joy that the Word became flesh and

dwelt among us,--all of us-- full of grace and full of truth, the first gift of God's self giving love which brings universes into being and opens to us the way of abundant and everlasting life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.