

December 24, 2011

Christmas Eve

John 3:16

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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

Story and Invitation

Whatever the reason that brings us here this night, we are, every one of us, marking and celebrating a great religious festival. And we are doing this in an age in which we recognize the importance of religion in international affairs and despair of the marriage of violence and power that seems to go with it. Some researchers call the Pacific Northwest the 'none zone', not because of a remarkable plethora of women in religious orders, but because the vast majority of people asked their religious preference answer 'none'. You might be a person, and if not, you certainly know others, who will happily and without irony, describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'. I have found it best not to push too hard on whether that phrase has any real positive content or meaning for the people who use it. What is clear is that they think religion in general or 'organized religion' in particular is a bad thing which has no positive impact on their lives. The great essayist and polemicist who died recently, Christopher Hitchens, was one of the so-called 'new atheists' who railed against all the harm that has been done by and in the name of this religion or that over the ages and concluded that the world would be better off if we could eradicate it. He and others like to mock notions of God as nonsensical, but what I think they really dislike is the abuse of power that we see whenever one set of people seek to impose their ideas on another set of people, allegedly for the good of the other, but really for the aggrandizement of the powerful. God is not nonsense, but rather seeks to save us from the kind of nonsense that includes crusades and inquisition, the systematic cover up of sexual misconduct by clergy, or justification of terror and murder. The child whose birth we mark and celebrate this night will grow to expose nonsense and enable us to live in new and different way.

In Jesus, we are offered both story and invitation which can and have been perverted into doctrine imposed and coercion but which need not be. *Religio* means 'I bind' in Latin—the same root as ligament or ligature from medicine. *Ligamentum* was 'a bandage' or 'a wrap of cloth'. A swaddling cloth was just such a bandage. As the story of Jesus and his importance was inevitably pushed back to the strange circumstances of his birth (and then later to his presence at creation as the Divine Word—"In the beginning was the Word...") religion was at the heart of the story. Mary and Joseph wrapped their baby in swaddling cloths just as we do today. They *bound* him, both reminding him of the safety of the womb and protecting him from the germs that were all around him. Appropriate binding can be about greater freedom and making us strong, and, ironically, making us truly free.

One way in which our story has been told down the ages is the story of God choosing limits, choosing particularity. Jesus was born into a particular time and place. This adopting of limits proved to be the way of salvation in many ways, not least in the

quality of the particular relationships in which Jesus found himself. He taught his disciples and called them friends. He shared himself with others as well as having times when he withdrew to pray or rest. He received and accepted gifts including the costly oils that Mary of Magdala poured on him in Simon's house. He denied illegitimate power and acted with integrity when he kept silence at his trial. He taught non violent resistance to oppression when he said turn the other cheek and walk the extra mile. He extended himself to the rich when he dined with the powerful and especially to the poor when he dined with them. But perhaps most of all he helped us see ourselves as people beloved of God and so people who do not need to abuse power. We do not need to blame others in order to feel better about ourselves. We do not need to demonize those with whom we disagree. And Jesus shows us that we do not have to internalize oppression when we find ourselves in the role of the weak, the powerless or the victim. We do not have to tell ourselves that we are less than we are. We do not have to avoid contact with others in a kind of self righteous reverse prejudice. We do not have to imagine that we are cheating anyone other than ourselves if we try and beat the system.

This story of the babe of Bethlehem is the story of one who will grow to invite us into a radically renewed humanity, a new community marked first by love. We are invited to become participants in that story, freely choosing to bind ourselves to one another, to embrace true religion if you like, so that we can live more freely and more generously and more courageously than we ever imagined possible in this material world. We are invited to discover this new humanity in which people choose to be limited for the sake of others and so discover the truth that it is in apparent limits that we are freed; so it is in giving that we receive, in service we find freedom and in dying to ourselves we discover real and abundant life.

Some of you will recognize the story of a group of five monks—all that were left of a once great monastic community. The writing was on the wall and this brotherhood was not going to survive. The Abbott went in to the nearby woods to pray and came across an elderly Rabbi who is also praying in the woods. In the course of their conversation about the old days the Abbott asks the Rabbi for advice about his monastery. All that the Rabbi has to say is "One of you is the Messiah."

When the monks heard this rather odd response, they just laughed. They knew each other's faults *far* too well. But they began to wonder if it might just be possible that one of them was the Messiah and slowly, slowly, over time, a new respect began to grow among them for each of their gifts and their sacrifices. Slowly and surely a new sense of dignity shaped their common life and, almost inevitably others were soon attracted to join them. When the story of Jesus is told in ways that lead us to know more freedom, live more courageously, more generously, more whole and integrated lives than before, then the invitation is compelling.

Tonight we are celebrating the birth of hope into our world and into our lives. We are celebrating that it is in the particularity of God's commitment to us that we can begin to find grace to make our own commitments to live among the followers of Jesus on the Way and in the Way that is the Way of life. It is never too late to join us. This is not the 'none zone'. This is the place where we celebrate the reality of all that is Christmas, and

celebrate with abandon. If you would like to make a commitment to exploring and living this way of life—or if you would like to renew a commitment to following this way that has perhaps become a little stale for you—or if you are looking for a community of faith that will not ask you to check your brain at the door and who in all likelihood also reject the God that you have rejected but who know God as the source of real and abundant life, then consider coming forward to communion and saying YES to God, YES to life, YES to hope and YES to all things that the story of Christmas and its invitation to particular commitment imply. And then be sure and tell someone that you accepted the invitation. A very happy, merry and blessed Christmas to every one of you.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.
AMEN