



# St. Paul's Church

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If everyone were holy and handsome, with “alter Christus” shining in neon lighting from them, it would be easy to see Christ in everyone. If Mary had appeared in Bethlehem clothed, as St. John says, with the sun, a crown of twelve stars on her head and the moon under her feet, then people would have fought to make room for her. But that was not God’s way for her nor is it Christ’s way for Himself now when He is disguised under every type of humanity that treads the earth.

## Dorothy Day (December 1945)

For many of us, it will be hard to tell what kind of Christmas we will have. Many of us will have family present and there will be much laughing, relief and joy that we were not revisiting the restrictions of last year, when we could not visit anyone and, if it was a family affair, it was largely so via Zoom. We will have the chance to actually be in one another’s company. It will be easy to repeat, with the angels, *Hodie Christus natus est*—Christ is born today.

Having spent some time on hospital oncology floors recently, I can tell you that the prayers will be of a different sort for others. It will be for those who cannot celebrate themselves, for whom

Christmas will mean goodbye, but it is also for them that Christ was born.

## Christ Disguised

And there are those who, like the Holy Family, will have no home. There will be no shortage of Christmas dinners prior to the holiday but, at the end of the day will be left with the cold and the concrete. It is these, the lonely and the neglected, for whom Day asks us to be aware. Her challenge is to see Christ in all these situations, because we are not born too late. “In Christ’s human life there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it, their hurrying to the crib atoned for the people who would flee from Christ. The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand’s breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ.”

She continues, “We can do it too, exactly as they did. We are not born too late. We do it by seeing Christ and serving Christ in friends and strangers, in everyone we come in contact with. While almost no one is unable to give some hospitality or

help to others, those for whom it is really impossible are not debarred from giving room to Christ, because, to take the simplest of examples, in those they live with or work with is Christ disguised. All our life is bound up with other people; for almost all of us happiness and unhappiness are conditioned by our relationship with other people. What a simplification of life it would be if we forced ourselves to see that everywhere we go is Christ, wearing out socks we have to darn, eating the food we have to cook, laughing with us, silent with us, sleeping with us.”

If our charge is to Christ in all we see, I believe we have to see it in those whose circumstances are the hardest. If we are grateful for the people we see, people who have represented the holy to us, the challenge is to see Christ where we least expect him. It is why our Christmas Eve celebration will begin with the blessing of the manger As Day says, it would be easy if he appeared with neon signs but that is never God’s way. God’s way is to have us seek out the holy meagre, even the absurd, because we cannot be complete without the recognition that Christ was born on the margins, the most vulnerable of infants. We are not too late. I hope all have the most joyous of Christmases and may we all be blessed in our search or the Holy Family in the corners of our lives.

Abba Anthony said,  
“Whoever hammers a lump of iron, first decides what he is going to make of it, a scythe, a sword or an axe. Even so we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we forge, or we labor in vain.”

Abba Anthony the Great

Being mindful of what the road to hell is paved with, I have spent much of this Advent at the bedside of someone I know quite well, someone who has known me all my life and has taught me more about myself than anyone I know. I have been with her because her health is failing; she is not expected to recover and I believed that being with her in this part of her journey (my words, not hers) would be a good and holy thing. It has been those things, although not in a gauzy, soft-focus way. She knows all my buttons (my wife reminds me that

# Being Formed

she installed them), and waiting with her has been a gift, in the same way that a cold shower can be a gift if we ever fall too much in love with what we think of as our own piety.

My principal argument with Anthony is that we can choose the kind of person into whom we will be formed, the amount of control we have in the ways in which our character or virtues are etched into us. I recognize myself in this person, sometimes more often than I care to admit, but she is a part of me and will always be so. The quality of our relations has wavered over the years but she is integral to me in a way that no one else is; I don't believe that I could begin to understand myself without her.

Advent is, of course, a time for waiting and we will be waiting

together over the next few weeks. Insofar as it is possible, I hope it can be a joyful time, as well as a time for preparation. She endures a lot of pain these days, which makes joy difficult, but I am reminded of C.S. Lewis's thought about joy as the longing for longing, which does not always help but reminds me our relations with God are fundamentally aspirational, that the shape into which we are molded, scythe, sword or axe, is principally the work of God, not of our own effort. Anthony, like all the desert mothers and fathers, wanted an environment to cultivate the virtues. I am increasingly aware of how much of that work has been done, it only remains for God to transform them.

The principal gift from Anthony, in my view, is that the images he uses for our formation are not ones of Jesus sitting with the little children on his lap, offering parables with misty eyes, a God in the Box for those who cannot tear themselves away from the popular depictions of him this time of year. We are being hammered and forged, put through the refiner's fire. For many of this, it has already happened. But even as our Christmas celebration, for that culture, will end on December 26 (or whenever we get around to returning the gifts), we will still be formed by what God has planted in us and the refining work he continues with us, after all the celebrations are over.

Fr. Mark

**Today the unknown  
seeks the known**

**What I am willed to  
ask, your own**

**Will has to answer;  
child, it lies**

**Within your power of  
choosing to**

**Conceive the Child who  
chooses you.**

W.H. Auden "For the Time Being"

The above lines are a conversation between Mary and the Archangel Gabriel about what it is to will ourselves to say yes to God's will. It is a paradox that we should choose to say "yes" at the beginning of our year to allow this child to be born within us just as Mary the Christ-bearer said, in Luke's words, "Let it be with me according to your will." Much of this very long poem is about the ways in which the holy becomes tainted by the everyday, the 8:15 train, where "the kitchen table exists because I scrub it." Being human, we are not very good at mysteries. But the fact is that Mary chooses to bear a child because the child has chosen her.

We all fail in ways, large and small to honor the image of the divine, which is why we need this Advent/Christmas/Epiphany cycle so deeply. We, of all people have

# For the Time Being

been chosen to be Christ-bearers, even with our memories of past regrets and cruelties pulling at us. Auden knew what he was talking about. An Anglo-American, he wrote this very long (1500 words) poem during a trip to America in 1941-42. It was published in 1944, in the hardest part of the fighting in Europe, and he seems to long for the mundane when things have been to caught-up in the murderous intensity of war, the "horror, as he calls it.

We have had our own horror this year, of a pandemic that refuses to go away, of lives lost or maimed in the combination a politicized contagion and the reversion to our worst instincts about how to treat one another. And yet we have been chosen by the child which we have been asked to conceive. It is a commonplace to think that we have become God-bearers in a world that resists all attempts to make sacred who we are. But Auden turns the situation around. It is as if we hear the conversation

between Gabriel and Mary, about her grand, unlikely role in God's plan of salvation, and then to hear from the archangel, almost as an afterthought, "And by the way, he chose you."

In this year when our very humanity can feel more cheap than ever, when we are at a depth of discourse that would have been unimaginable five years ago, we have been chosen. We are asked not only to bear the intensity of the worst we can think of one another and then to remember that we are the ones picked out for this duty, not some shinier, more worthy people but us. We have to bring forth what Godself has chosen under circumstances that we would never choose. It is those circumstances and our chosen-ness that make this time holy. Let us treasure this chosen-ness for the time being, through this season and the rest of our lives.

Fr. Mark

## Christmas Masses 2021

Friday, December 24:  
7pm

Saturday December  
25: 8am

Sunday, December 26  
9:30 and 11am