

Bishop Bower's Christmas Message 2024

Peace be with you!

Beloved, we come again to yet another Christmas in the cycle of the Church. It is important to remember that it is the lectionary of the Church that sets this festival and not the secular world. Of course, the commercial world has adopted the festival and has perverted it to its end of making money from the sale of things that, if we are honest, we really don't need. Today, even atheists take part in the Christmas festivities.

As Christians, we shouldn't view Christmas in a protective fashion, looking with a sense of superiority at those who do not understand the 'reason for the season', but rather see it as an opportunity to introduce the truth behind the celebration. This is perhaps best summed up in the prologue to St. John's gospel, and of course, in John 3:16-17. It is profoundly sad that the society around us views Christmas in a transactional light whose currency is presents, parties, and senseless frivolity.

There is absolutely nothing objectively wrong with celebrating, the giving of gifts, and being joyful. In fact, as Christians we would present a better witness to our culture if we were more joyful. The issue here is one of intention. What is the motivation for our celebration? Is it merely the societal expectations of the season, or is there more to it?

We all know the story of the incarnation of our Lord, Jesus the Christ. There being no room in the inn, Mary and Joseph take refuge in a stable, likely a cave being used as a barn. We know that Christ the Savior is born in the lowest possible way. But do we know why?

To understand this we turn to Philippians 2:5-11

"5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 6 who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. 9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Jesus, the Word of God, who called into existence mankind to be "made in the image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1:26-27), now empties Himself and is "made in the likeness of men". The text says that he "humbles Himself" which is an awkward translation of *εκενσεν ηεαυτον*, which means to empty himself, to pour out all pride and sense of status to minister to humanity. But why? In a word, love. The endless love of God for His creation.

One of the many charisms of our Anglo-Catholic tradition is the sense of a contemplative faith. This approach to the spiritual life offers a quiet and deep-seated sense of holiness as we approach God. It is based in same sense of kenosis, or emptying of ourselves, to be filled up with the Holy Spirit of God. The concept is simple, we work to remove our sins and vices, to squelch our sense of pride (which is the original sin), and seek to replace those passions with godly virtues. It is not glamorous, or flashy, nor is

it likely to fill our churches with people eager to be entertained. But it follows the example of Jesus – humility.

While the world celebrates Christmas starting at Thanksgiving (or before) and ends in a single day of presents, we celebrate the sober season of Advent, with Christmas day starting a 12-day cycle of joy. For centuries it was the custom to open presents on Epiphany, recalling the Wisemen’s bringing of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, instead of opening presents on Christmas day. That pious practice kept the focus of Christmas on the incarnation of the Lord. While difficult to do in our culture, (especially if you have children), it can be recalled by holding a gift or two back until Epiphany.

We are a “peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9) and our approach to faith is more ancient than most contemporary Christians. While many Christian churches are holding lavish plays and exciting worship services on Christmas Eve, we are coming together for midnight Mass. While other Christian churches do not have services on Christmas day, we are coming together for the Mass of the Incarnation. But why? Our emphasis is *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus”*, kenosis, emptying ourselves so that we might be filled with the grace of God that comes only through Christ.

One of my favourite Christmas carols, “It came upon a midnight clear” reflects this difference in approach to Christmas whenever it says:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
Oh, hush the noise, ye men of strife
And hear the angels sing.

This Christmas, take time to slow down, be still, and empty yourself of the noise of the world. You will be glad that you did, and maybe, just maybe, you will hear the angels sing. And when you do, you will find a deeper peace and joy than the world will ever know.

Peace be with you this Christmas and always!

Bishop Bower
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