

Christmas 1, year C December 31, 2006 Cathedral Church of St. Paul

Only a few days ago we were all caught up in the great excitement of the season. After all the waiting, we knew Christmas was finally at hand. We had spent weeks in preparation; we had given days and days to our shopping and wrapping, addressing, and mailing. In the last few hours before the day came we even experienced those times when we wondered if we had done everything, or if everything we had done was really worth the effort! But suddenly Christmas was upon us. We decided it was worth-while; it really was that exciting.

Whether or not we look back on the holiday as a runaround, a terrific party, or a spiritual high—and Christmas, as it is celebrated today--- is probably something of all three, nonetheless, it is just as well to come

back to earth. It is a reminder that life continues in everyday circumstances; people return to work and school, meals are prepared, hurts and happiness alternate—and people die. Life goes on, we say.

Yes, but we must also realize that Christ LIVES on. We don't say Merry Christmas any longer, but we continue to say, at least during the Eucharist, "The Lord be with you." We should not wrap up our religious feelings, the closeness we felt to God and to each other, and put them away with the holiday decorations. Those sentiments are meant for the long haul—the nearness of God, the presence of God in Christ, and Christ as the centerpiece of our lives. Because we must not lose the importance of the message that God's love for us, proved by Christ's birth, should change our lives.

“Love is a power that can’t let us alone. It can’t because we owe our existence to acts of love performed before us, because love is a standing debt of the soul.” These words were written by novelist Saul Bellow. They are reassuring words. It is comforting to note that we exist not because of some accident or quirk of fate. Love is the force that brought us into being—each one personally, and all of us as a race of people.

Bellow’s insight is not altogether original. St. John had said it centuries before. Speaking of our redemption through Jesus Christ, the evangelist wrote these words: “Of his fullness we have all had a share—love following upon love.” To contemplate the meaning of Christmas then is to consider an unbroken chain that begins with creation itself, but is reformed with the birth of Christ. It is a chain that stretches to our own day

through our Church, in our communities, in our families, among our friends.

To contemplate the festival of Christmas, that time set aside to remember love's force, is to realize that the chain, which stretches so far back into history, should be extended far into the future. This feast which we celebrate with our closest family and best friends should be proclaimed to the entire world. For a brief time at the end of December, using all the trappings of the season, we get just a glimpse of our destiny; we know, at least for a moment, how it always should be.

The time spent in gift-giving and feasting should never end. The ancient carols we sing should unite us all in one chorus. The outpouring of charity during this season should be extended to encompass all humanity.

The ritual messages of peace on earth, often sent between enemy leaders, are the sentiments that should inform the relations between all peoples. For a brief time each December, because of the birth of Jesus, we acknowledge that love is the standing debt of the soul. We know that we have had a share in his fullness—love following upon love. And we know that Christmastime epitomizes the way our lives were meant to be led. Some families think of themselves as a fortress, huddled together to ward off outsiders. A more Christmas image is that of a harbor. In a harbor we are sheltered and protected but there is still openness to the outside world.

T.S. Eliot wrote that we grasp just a bit of the importance of Christmas; “the hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.”

We may put boundaries around Christmas time because we cannot keep up the pace. But we must understand that what we do in these days is significant beyond them. Long after Christmas is past we must meditate more fully on what the Incarnation did to us.

The Incarnation changes us. It tells us of the glory of humanity and our worth before God. It hints at our divine potential. We cannot speak about one another unless we note that God became one of us. All relations between individuals and among peoples should begin with the acknowledgement of the worth conferred on us by this divine act. John said it most beautifully: "Any who did accept Him, He empowered to become children of God." This is what is so hard to grasp and why the poet is correct: "The gift half understood is Incarnation." If only we could

believe it about ourselves! We are worth so much in the eyes of God that God sought to become one of us. And then if we could learn to believe it about others. God shares our humanity: we are empowered to become children of God.

What we do at Christmas then, would take on eternal significance. The peace of which we sing and offer to others in cards might become a reality. The gifts we give and the charity in which we engage might become a way of life. The food and drink now shared with friends and family could become a gift to the hungry world. The lights we hang on the trees and our homes might light the way for those in the darkness of loneliness and confusion. All this because we begin to realize the eternal gift that has been given to us.

“Love is a power that can’t let us alone...Love is the standing debt of the soul.” The festival of the birth of Christ gives us a moment to acknowledge our debt and to celebrate what has been changed in us. “Of his fullness we have all had a share—love following on love.” What we experience in our families and among our friends is part of a chain reaction that began so long ago, to be kept alive by all who recognize Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh. We need to consider that love, though, is a power that can’t leave us untouched. Because of it “we are empowered to become children of God.”

We gather now at this Eucharistic feast to acknowledge our indebtedness to the power of the love that created us and has redeemed us. As children of God, we can commit ourselves to extend his fullness to

others until all come together at his table where there is the continuation  
of this chain of "love following upon love."

AMEN