

ALL SAINTS ANGLICAN CHURCH
Springfield, Missouri
HOMILY FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, 2008
John H. Simmons
December 28, 2008

Old Testament: Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm: Psalm 148

Epistle: Galatians 4:4-7

Gospel: Luke 2:22-40

Father, help us to keep the remembrance of our Lord's nativity in our hearts through each day of the year, remembering all You have done for us in giving us Your Son, and all He has done for us by being the one acceptable sacrifice for our sins and thereby allowing us to come into full and eternal fellowship with You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

It's possible to think when we have gotten past December 25th that Christmas is over. In our calendar the season of Christmas only begins on December 25th and goes on for twelve days, until Epiphany on January 6th.

We may not have pear trees and lords-a-leaping, but during the Season of Christmas, we also observe St. Stephen's Day, the Feast of John the Apostle and today, the slaying of the Holy Innocents. As the cycle of the church year progresses we mark occasions of great joy as well as times of sadness and cruelty and sacrifice.

In some Eastern calendars the period between Epiphany, called the "Theophany, which means "The Revealing," and the beginning of the Pascal Triodion, February 8 this year, is the season of the Natal Feast. Yes, some Orthodox churches celebrate the season of Christmas for over a month.

So don't be too quick to take down your Christmas tree and do keep the Christ Candle burning.

In reality we should keep the spirit of Christmas all year 'round, even during Lent when we prepare for the remembrance of the Lord's death and resurrection. We celebrate life even in the shadow of death. Our liturgy for the burial of the dead says it well, "Even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

Stephen, as he was being stoned, looked up and saw, not death, but life, eternal life, and praised God for it. Even in death, Stephen saw the Lord of Life.

One of my college literature professors said that the pre-Christian Greeks could write tragedy but Christians could not. There is no true Christian tragedy. Even at his darkest, Shakespeare ended his plays with the hope of salvation and the resurrection of the faithful to eternal life. The Christian lives in hope, never in despair.

One of the things which disturbs me most about our increasingly secular culture is the loss of

hope. Contemporary drama, literature, poetry, painting, all the arts, have become hopeless, and with the loss of hope, nihilistic, without meaning.

Only in a culture like ours could Albert Camus write that the hero of his novel "The Stranger" looked out at the vast night sky and took comfort in the "benign indifference of the universe." Camus, like the archtypical modern man, came to believe only in the absurdity of human existence in an indifferent universe. Life as it is portrayed in modern culture is meaningless. God is thought to be dead and, with Him, the human soul is also dead or nonexistent.

In a sense contemporary culture has proven what the Word of God has always taught, that without God mankind really is without hope. The spirit of this season is not just one of good will among men but the proclamation of the good will of God bestowed on mankind.

You note I said "bestowed" by God on us. His good will, His grace and love, can never be earned by fallen humanity but only by the sinless one, Jesus Christ, and He alone is the propitiation for our sin. He alone is the acceptable sacrifice for our broken lives and our broken relationship with the Father.

But, thanks be to God, the Lord has come, and He has, by His life, death and resurrection paid the price we could not pay. He has opened the door we could not open. He has reestablished fellowship between us and God.

So what is our response to this Good News? Do we accept it passively, looking forward to our eventual life with God in heaven? Do we see our faith as some sort of insurance plan by which we get a free pass and end up with the sheep rather than with the goats?

If that is all our faith is about it represents an incomplete Christianity. It is little more than a system by which we make our accommodation with God and assure ourselves that we don't have anything to be too worried about.

Jesus Christ did not come to live His perfect life and suffer His atoning death in order to create a special class of privileged but passive people. He came to bring Good News, not just a pleasant announcement. Jesus proclaimed amazing news, life-changing, life-affirming news, news which, if we really get hold of its significance, can turn us into dynamos, empowered people who can shake our world. We are meant to be people who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, can change the tired, defeated, hopeless world system. Our congregation, our community and our entire world can be transformed into the likeness of God's Kingdom. We can be messengers of life over death, love over hate, even joy over apathy. God's proclamation, His Good News, can make us into what He wants us to be, a community of lovers, of compassionate people, a congregation which truly is the Light of Christ.

So here is my challenge to you as well as to myself, to all of us:

Take seriously the true message of Christmas, that God has come in the person of Jesus Christ

and has proclaimed peace and grace and love. He has destroyed death and made all creation new. He has bridged the breach between ourselves and the Father.

Then apply that truth to our lives, apply it to the situations in which we live and work, demonstrate it where we go to school. It will transform everything. Apply it to our friendships and our most intimate relationships. If we really get hold of what God has done, what He is still doing, it will truly transform everything we touch, every situation we are a part of, every friendship and relationship. It will transform our own lives and the lives of everyone around us.

What is this truth, what is it we believe, what is this startling news? Our faith is summed up in the creed we are about to say together. It is so easy to say the creed and not even hear it. Today I'd ask you to listen, really listen, as we together proclaim the truth.