

Christ Church Sermons

The Feast of the Nativity, Christmas Eve (6:00 pm)
2007

December 24,

The Reverend Dr. Winston B. Charles

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14

And God became flesh and dwelt among us...

"The people who have lived in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined."
(Isaiah 9:2)

At the end of our Festal Eucharist tonight, each of us will hold a candle that receives the light from the Christ candle, expressing the wondrous good news that comes to us through the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery of the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger.

How fortunate are they who hear and understand this Good News that God is One who brings to us healing and faith and love and hope that overcomes darkness and brings light and life to us and to the whole world! How fortunate to be gathered here in this beautiful sacred space in the heart of the city Raleigh that envelopes us with the wondrous mystery of God's grace and power!

Let us not quickly pass by this moment, but rather quietly and boldly open our hearts to receive the true gift of Christmas.

Some of you are aware of the controversy surrounding the release of the movie *The Golden Compass*. *The Golden Compass* is the first of a fantasy trilogy such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Catalogued as youth literature, it presents, like the other two fantasies, a very well written, engaging, suspenseful tale of good versus evil, of a prophecy that a small child shall lead the liberating forces of good over the destructive forces of evil – with one major distinction. The author of *The Golden Compass*, Philip Pullman, is an avowed atheist and uses this trilogy, which he names *His Dark Materials*, to further his atheistic religion and to attack the church and god as he has rejected them.

Pullman and a number of others, such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris, have recently boldly professed their atheist convictions and presented arguments against religion in general and Christianity in particular. In one way this reaction against religion is understandable. When one observes today's world in which religion, specifically blind fundamentalism of various varieties, is responsible for so much death and destruction and hatred, one could be tempted to reject all religion as the source of pain and division and ignorance.

Just so, in *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Pullman sets up a world in which the Magisterium or the Authority - read the church - is led by a group of angry, power-hungry, mean men and women determined to rule the universe in the name of god no matter what the cost or the means, justified by the conviction that they and they alone know what is best. Their god is a function of their own ambitions and reflects their own blind determination.

So, in *His Dark Materials* trilogy, the Magisterium or Authority uses control, deception, intimidation, child kidnapping and abuse, censorship, anti-intellectualism, and murder to accomplish what they understand as god's will, whereas those who oppose the Magisterium demonstrate love, concern, self-sacrifice, camaraderie, honor, courage, creativity, and truth-seeking.

As so often occurs with those who attack the Church and God, Pullman has taken the very worse of actions and false beliefs of the Church and set those aside the very best of human nature. He has turned all on its head. He has rejected a god who is not God and a church that none of us would want to support or be a member of. It is a church that we ourselves would oppose with horror and determination. For this very reason, Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the twentieth century, noted that the Church, a very human institution, must ever be reforming itself into the image of God's intent in order to be the very incarnation of the Good News of the Christ Child to the world.

With a rising tide of religions that abuse the intent of God added to those who want to reject God and Church altogether, it is essential that we be clear and secure and grateful for the true Good News of the true God incarnated by the true Church, who is you and me and all the faithful.

The Gospel reading for the Third Sunday of Advent related Matthew's story of John the Baptist, who, while awaiting his execution in Herod's prison, heard of the wondrous works and teachings of Jesus and sent his disciples to Jesus to ask this question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11:2-3) Are you the promised one? the anointed one? the one through whom God is to do a new work, a new creation? the one who brings the very presence of the eternal God into the world and into our lives to redeem, to reconcile, to heal, to transform, to save, to empower the people of God? Are you the one?

Jesus' response focuses the question of just who is the God whom we worship, adore, seek, love, and follow. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed are those who take no offense at me." (Matthew 11:4-6)

Here is the true God whom we worship revealed in the incarnation of the Christ child. Ours is the God who heals and blesses, who opens blind eyes to see the fullness of life and love, who opens closed ears to hear truth and wonder, who lifts those who hear out of the despair of death in its many forms and gives new life to the hopeful, who brings good news to those who are poor in spirit, who feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, welcomes the stranger and visits the imprisoned. Here is the true God who creates us and loves us with all of the intensity and sacrifice of a mother or father perfect in their desire for their children to know the fullness of life and joy and purpose.

Here is the true God whom we worship who comes to us as one of us, the Eternal Word made flesh, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger with the Star of Bethlehem shining through this child to the whole world and the whole of life.

If we were to behold the fullness of God, we just might explode in joyful wonder, but tonight we taste a bit of this wonder as we hear the Christmas story, sing familiar carols, listen to the melodic voices of the choir and organ, feel the presence of love among us, receive the holy food of consecrated bread and wine, as we allow Jesus to open our ears that we might hear the Good News proclaimed, our eyes that we might see the wonder displayed, our hearts that we might receive the love offered through one who has come at great cost to embrace us - to embrace you.

It is this God who is the true God, and this Church that is the true Church.

Even though he would scorn me for saying so, I feel sorry for Mr. Pullman and persons who do not know the God whom we know and the Church that we love.

Our calling is to be the true Church that embodies true God so authentically that the Good News of Christmas is proclaimed to the poor and the fullness of God is known in the world.

So,

Come to Bethlehem and see
him whose birth the angels sing;
come, adore on bended knee,
Christ, the Lord, the new-born King.

Taste and see, taste and see, the goodness of the Lord. Amen.