

NEW YEAR'S DAY 2012

The perceptiveness among you will recall my having wished you a happy new year six weeks ago on Advent Sunday, the start of our new ecclesial year; however, with New Year's Day falling on a Sunday this year, it seems only fitting to wish you a happy new year once more. In this morning's Collect we "dedicate this new-born year to [Christ], praying that in it [His] holy Church may love [Him] more and serve [Him] better, growing ever in [His] heavenly wisdom as the years roll by." In that Collect I pledge St. Clement's new year's resolution, and I pray it will be yours also—to celebrate mass with me *each* Sunday of 2012. Indeed, if you added no other resolution than that—to sacrifice just 52 hours out of the 8,640 allotted to you, God willing, in the coming year—your spiritual life would flourish and nourish everyone in your sphere of influence.

This morning's hymns and our gospel reading from St. Luke remind us we are still within the octave of Christmas, with the shepherds' haste toward Bethlehem to inform the Holy Family of the angels' words. We learn that "all who heard it were amazed," as well they might be, having been told "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. . . you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Indeed, all "were amazed" save Mary, "who treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. She wasn't amazed because an angel had months ago appeared to her with the good news. Do we still hear it as "good news"? Or isn't it more likely that in our sophistication and overfamiliarity with the story we have already relegated the sentiment to the attics of our minds much the same as we will send the trimmings of the season to the attics of our homes, welcoming them again next year, of course, but not a moment before.

And while I would not have us be overly sentimental, I would have us try to hear the Word anew, to follow Christ's admonition to "have eyes to see and ears to hear," and more especially, to follow the advice given this morning in St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

St. Paul says Christ "emptied himself"—in Greek, *kenosis*—from which an entire subset of theology has sprung "to explain the condescension involved in the Incarnation" (Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church 776). Last week, you will recall, I labored to suggest we put the "mass" back in "Christmass." We celebrate mass on December 25th in honor of Christ's Incarnation, which means God's taking on our human flesh—an astounding idea, I'll grant you. Why did He do it? To give us an example, St. Paul seems to be saying. St. Clement of Alexandria goes him one better: "The Logos of God became man so that we may learn from man how to become God." That's theosis. That's our proper business. If our thoughts, our inclinations, our actions aren't reflective of our theosis, then what are we about? But what we need to remember is that our becoming God does not make us Allah or

Zeus or even Yahweh; to become the God of the Christians is to do something counterintuitive: we must let go.

What God did—does—we should do also.

St. Paul continues: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” There is a reciprocity here: Divine abnegation, ironically, leads to human exaltation. The way up is to go down. We do not gain by expansion but by its very opposite. Every parent knows this. Every soldier knows this. Every Buddha knows this. Everyone eventually learns this.

In his exploration of kenosis, University of Southern California professor emeritus and theologian Geddes MacGregor offers an intriguing analysis in *He Who Lets Us Be*:

The process of self-limitation that comes within the ambit of our own experience is adumbrated in the very act of man's first turning inwards from the external world. Primitive man, having been, like any other animal, habitually turned outwards to exercise his power, learns at last to turn inwards into the interior dimension of the life of the mind. Only then does he become truly human. Empirically, man does not look grander than the other animals. On the contrary, he cuts a poor figure by comparison with other mammals. He lacks the splendor of the lion and the magnificence of the tiger. He is incapable of the swift soaring elegance of the birds, the submarine capacity of the fish, and the resourceful agility of some of his own simian cousins. The size of his brain suggests superior cerebral power; but in itself it could not show man as radically better or “higher” than an elephant or a chimpanzee. Only through his invisible qualities, his unseen symbol-making and conceptualizing abilities, which give meaning to the noises he makes with his throat and mouth, is his superiority recognizable. It is within this dimension of his existence that he begins to discover that superior to the exercise of such physical powers as he possesses is his ability to renounce the use of power. Is not that why only humankind can laugh and weep?

So it is that man learns to turn away from uncontrolled aggression and piggish gluttony and savage lust toward the humane virtues and civilized restraints: toleration and sympathy, tenderness and compassion, discipline of the fiercer animal appetites. Gradually he asks not only the origin of the universe around him but the nature of the power that draws him into the newly discovered dimension within himself whose nature stands in such sharp contrast to that of the external world. More gradually still he learns the power of sacrificial love, apart from which all his attempts to conquer the world around him or to develop his human capacity are futile. If, at length, he sees that

divine Being beckons him as the source of whatever it is that he is becoming, he is on his way to understanding that he is called upon to worship neither brute force nor sultanic dominion but the divine kenotic power of which his own experience of human sacrificial love provides, however feebly, the best analogue (108-109).

[W]hen we. . .respond in love to the self-emptying God, we do so not merely by a nod or a bob or a hosanna or an amen but by our own self-abnegating acts. Simone Weil goes so far as to say: "We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves. . . .May God grant that I may become nothing." I think we must not take her literally, that we annihilate ourselves. On the contrary, she is providing us with the basis for a theology of creativity. She is saying that only by emptying myself can I in any way participate in the life of God, who is the plenitude of Being. . . .It is the secret behind the gospel paradox that I must give up my life to gain it (183).

This, then, is a truth about our Incarnate Lord, Jesus our Emmanuel, "God with us." Our proper business is theosis, as I said before, but it is not "Look at ME!" but "Look at THEE!" Think of all the ways God empties himself of divinity to make room for us, to allow us to move into the space he creates for us: think of Christ, "taking the form of a slave," come to serve, not to be served; think of Christ emptying himself even unto death on a cross, a God who dies that his creatures might live; think of Christ emptying himself in the form of a helpless babe wrapped in swaddling clothes; think of Christ emptying himself into bread and wine so "Thy many children [may] know themselves to be one in Thee, even as Thou art one with the Father." And, then, once you have thought on these things, do something, for Christ's sake.

Bishop Tony Howard
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1 January 2012