

We have all heard the saying, “Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.” I have no doubt of its truth. But I am here to tell you that at least sometimes, we weave just as tangled a web when we attempt to understand things. Such is the story of two millennia in attempting to understand Christmas. December 25th was not established as the birth date of Jesus until well into the 4th century. It was set to coincide with the return of the sun in the northern hemisphere borrowing on the Roman Saturnalia which celebrated the solstice. Then as now, for six months, the sun would be brighter every day. Hence the association with Jesus, the light of the world.

The early church before and after the 4th century was much more focused on the crucifixion and the resurrection than it was on Christmas. In a world of turmoil, the power of empire, the decline of that power, conquering and chaos, and connections beyond shared ethnicity, the early church was focused on hope in the face of impossible challenges, on the hope that there was a better life in this world or the next. The resurrection gave that hope.

In time, in mediaeval French, Noël became a phenomenon meaning a birth date. In English Nowell was used, but in the 11th century, it was replaced by Christmas, i.e. Christ’s Mass which is derived from the Greek word Χριστός (Khristós) which means anointed. Mass was a church service. It was much later that it became exclusively identified with a

communion service. I trust you begin to get a sense of the tangled weave. None of those who tried to establish the date, were attempting to deceive, but O Dear God, it got more and more tangled.

By the time of the reformation, things got even more tangled. For those who continued as Roman Catholics, Christmas developed increasing importance. On the opposite pole for those who were Calvinists, Christmas was a Roman abomination. During the Cromwell years in England, celebrating Christmas was explicitly forbidden. And even when I was a wee boy in Scotland in the 1950's my father worked on Christmas Day. The notion that it should be a holiday would be surrendering to Papists. Christmas Day only became a holiday in Scotland in 1958 after we were far away across the seas. Indeed, from the mid 16th century to well into the 19th, celebrating Christmas was deeply discouraged in Scotland. Do you see just how tangled the weave was, and is. By the way it was illegal and carried a 5 shilling fine to celebrate Christmas in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Celebrating Christmas in England was made normal in the first half of the 19th century when Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Saxe Coburg Gotha in 1840. Prince Albert brought Christmas trees, decorations, and presents from the Germanic to the Anglo-world. Those traditions merged with near forgotten traditions from the time of Henry VIII of Father Christmas. In the United States somewhat earlier, the Dutch

settlers in New Amsterdam later New York brought regard for St. Nicholas a 4th century bishop renowned for secret gift giving and the patron saint of children. In Dutch, St. Nicholas was known as Sinterklass, which was Americanized to Santa Claus. Over time Father Christmas and Santa Claus merged into one. The famous poem, *T'was the night before Christmas*, cemented the connection of Santa Claus and Christmas. The current image of Santa Claus was from a cartoon by Thomas Nast a German born American cartoonist which was published in Harper's Weekly on January 2nd, 1863. Into the 20th Century, particularly from 1931 when the Coca Cola Santa first appeared, Christmas became a consumerist celebration with an increasingly weaker connection to the Holy Birth – the connection weaker, but never entirely severed.

Christians are often referred to as Easter People. We are Easter People, because we profoundly believe that the death and resurrection of the Christ brings the possibility of light and life into the darkest events of human existence. But as much as we are Easter People, I would argue that we are at least as much Christmas People. Because beneath all the sentimentality and commercialism, Christmas is pivotal to our personal faith and to our identity as a Christian community. At Christmas, our God took on flesh and human experience to model ways of life for humanity. More powerfully than prophets, saints, and martyrs, our God took on flesh and

became human while remaining fully God. Think of the beginning of John's Gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

And our God was not a privileged visitor amongst us, our God was not a wealthy tourist observing the quaint habits of the locals. Our God took on the full range of human pain and suffering and showed a way not to triumph over it, but to triumph through it. Our God was not a distant power lording it over us. Jesus was not simply an exemplary human being. Our God became incarnate, fully God and fully human, in order to demonstrate a way and sanctify that way for every human being. Our God fully experienced human challenge and demonstrated a way through it. Our God knew we would slip, but in championing outcasts and sinners, our God created paths for us to return and return again and again to the path that our God embodied, incarnate in the man Jesus. That is why Christmas is so foundationally important. Without Christmas, there can be no Easter.

And let us be clear, Our God chose to become incarnate not in an idyllic setting, in a land at peace. Our God took on flesh and dwelt among us in a poor country under a brutal and often violent occupation by a tyrannical empire and its corrupt local collaborators. Our God came among us in a time that

Easter became inevitable. In the 30 odd years between the Incarnation and the resurrection, Jesus trod the path of being fully human in the most difficult of circumstances and showed how to follow that difficult path to new life and light.

Now let me turn to today's readings. In our brief reading from Isaiah the coming of the Incarnate God is foretold. *For he said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely'; and he became their saviour in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel, but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.* It is an act of hubris to attempt to add to Isaiah, but in his love and pity he carries us still, not just in the days of old.

Our reading from Matthew tells us how within a few days of his birth, our Incarnate Lord became a refugee from a tyrannical despot. Like his grandson Herod Agrippa who handed Jesus over to be crucified thirty some years later, Herod the Great ruled with violence and cruelty all in the service of quelling his fears that he could lose his own position of power. The birth of Jesus, already predicted for the ages by prophets and brought to Herod's attention by the three wisemen, provoked in Herod, great fear and thus unimaginable violence in the slaughter of every male child in Judea under two years of age. Do not miss the parallel from Exodus 1 when Pharoah commands all midwives to kill Hebrew boys as soon as they were born. And also do not miss

the paradox that in the time of the Exodus, Egypt was a place from which the Hebrews needed to escape. In our passage, Egypt is a refuge for the infant Son of Man. Clearly no one and no place is always safe from the chaos unleashed by despotic forces in fear for their status and position. So our newborn Lord lacked even a manger for a bed as the Holy Family flees into Egypt to avoid Herod's murderous campaign.

In time, after the death of Herod the Great, the angel of the Lord appears yet again to Joseph and tells him to return with Mary and Jesus. But, it is not clear that they can be safe in Judea because Archelaus, son of Herod the Great and father of Herod Agrippa rules, so they go to Nazareth beyond Archelaus' jurisdiction. But even Nazareth was a tenuous shelter for the Son of Man. In Matthew 13: 54 – 58 we read of Jesus' rejection by the Nazarenes and his response, *Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house.*

Our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews provides an interesting perspective on our reading from Matthew. First of all it is helpful to remember that the Letter of the Hebrews was written in the 60's of the common era, certainly before 70 because it references the continuation of Temple practices. The Temple was destroyed in 70. Matthew's Gospel on the other hand was written sometime in the 80's well after the destruction of the Temple in a time of ever present threats to believers in Jesus, both Jew and Gentile. Our passage this

morning emphasizes that Jesus is fully God and fully human. He is not ashamed to call those to whom he ministers brothers and sisters. *Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things....Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.* Our passage from Matthew makes it clear that the testing for Jesus began with birth and continued through the crucifixion until the ultimate glory of the resurrection. But critical to all of this is the fact that God became incarnate in a fully human life and that is why Christmas is the foundational event that makes all else possible.

Never fail to notice that our Lord, even though fully human and fully God, never experienced power, riches, high status, comfortable living. He was a refugee, an indigent, an itinerant with no home of his own. He died a shameful death with the lowest of criminals. But he was a scourge of tyrants, a threat to the powerful, and a thorn in the flesh to the establishment. He brought comfort to the poor and affirmation to the lowly or as it is put in Hebrews, *Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.* But the brothers and sisters he chose to emulate were not the grand and the glorious, but ordinary folk struggling in a difficult world. Remember the words of Mary: *He has exalted the humble and meek, and the rich he has sent empty away.*

So what does all this mean as 2025 becomes 2026 and we near the end of the second millennium since the crucifixion and the resurrection? As of mid-2025, there were 117.3 million displaced people in the world, 14% of the world's population. There have never been more. They are people who have had to leave their home countries or their home regions; people whose homes have been destroyed; people who have lost everything including parents and children, brothers and sisters; people, every one of them, a brother or a sister of Jesus.

Of tyrants, there have never been more in number and more in power. The Herods are minor bit players compared to many abroad today who out of fear for their own skins are creating misery at an unparalleled level. And if the actions of the fully established tyrants are not bad enough, there are would be tyrants rejecting the displaced and the dispossessed, unleashing illegal witch hunts to purge their own countries of those refugees whom other tyrants have rendered poor and helpless. And let us be clear, many of those would be tyrants have the full support of many of their countries' citizens. Many of those citizens, supportive of their tyrants and would be tyrants, don't want to think, don't want to be challenged, don't want to really see Jesus even though they often claim to be Christians. Again fear is at work. Fear that helping the helpless might cost, might change ways of life, might be inconvenient.

We know whom Jesus came to save. We know who Jesus' brothers and sisters are. Are they ours? We are being tested. If our answer is no, if we can turn our backs on them, how can we be followers of Jesus? Will our fear of inconvenience, discomfort, and change cost us our most important relationship – that with the incarnate God, the risen Christ? What do you think we should we do to celebrate the birth of the child? May we all find ways to draw closer to our God, and to all our brothers and sisters in 2026.

Every best wish for the New Year to every one of you and to all those who desperately need a better year than the ones they have known recently or for some better than they ever have known.

Amen