

THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS
A Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2010
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Until sundown, today was the last day of Advent, the season of our penitent but joyful preparation in anticipation of our celebration of Christmas. Christmas is a complex holiday now, because it has had all sorts of secular stuff heaped on it, folk traditions for all around the world, mostly from northern Europe. And here we sit, mostly descendents of Europeans, in the dark season of winter, after days of snow and freezing rain, which gave us a landscape that we expect and hope for at Christmas time. We want to have a white Christmas.

For us Christians, that is not a wrong thing to hope for any more than it is wrong to decorate a tree and our houses. It is just that those things really have nothing to do with Christ's mass. The PB gives this day two of its rightful names: **The Nativity of our Lord, or the Birthday of Christ, commonly called Christmas Day.**

Christmas is **not** about decorating trees or trying to buy the perfect gift for everyone in our families, or making sure we sent a Christmas card to all those whom we think we should have sent one. For Christians, Christmas should be about one thing, celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, celebrating what God the Son did, as described in what we just said in the Nicene Creed: **Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man.** That, in short, is the message of Christmas.

Jesus did not just magically appear in the world as a fully grown man. He was conceived in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit in one of the great mysteries of our faith, and went through the usual nine months of gestation before being born as a human baby. He then went through the usual processes of growth through childhood and adolescence to become a man.

Why did He come to go through all He went through? To spend 33 or 34 years in a human body, to endure Crucifixion and Death. Why would He do that? Why would God do that. The Bible gives us the answer in many places, but that answer is condensed in that one phrase in the Creed, **Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven.** He did it for our salvation. He came to preach the Gospel of Salvation through faith. Salvation from what? Salvation from death and to Eternal life

During His life on earth and after it, there were those who came up with all sorts of weird explanations of Who and What He was. Some said He was simply a person that God picked out and gave special powers to. That is a heresy called Adoptionism. Others ignored his birth and said he was simply God appearing as a person. That's another heresy, which is called Docetism, from the Greek word, **δοκέω**, which means **to seem**. The Docetists thought He only seemed to be human. Then there was this fellow named Arius, who thought and taught that Christ had been created by God the Father. Arius said there was a time when He was not. It was this heresy of Arius' that caused the Council of Nicea to be called, to wrestle with and declare this idea of Arius' to be a heresy. The first version of the Nicene Creed came out of that Council, and

Arianism is disposed of by the beginning of the description of Jesus Christ as: “**the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of His Father before all worlds**”.

In the first part of that two part phrase, *only-begotten*, is an inadequate English translation of a single Greek word that is usually translated as unique, with the idea that begotten does not carry the meaning of having been created. **Begotten of His Father before all worlds** means that He existed with the Father before creation occurred. In this phrase, *Before*, does not mean in front of; it means before in time. Actually for Jesus, it means he existed before there was any such thing as time because God is outside of time. Time is simply an attribute of Creation.

The wonderful thing about this service of Lessons and Carols is that the lessons, and to some extent the Carols answer the questions we have about Jesus and the meaning of Christmas.

The first lesson from Genesis tells us why Jesus Christ has to be born: because man disobeyed God and fell into sin; and death came into the world. Then we heard how God made His Covenant with Abraham and promised him that his offspring would be as numerous as the sand of the seashore, and that they shall be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Yes, one of Abraham’s offspring, by human descent, is Jesus, Who is indeed a blessing to all the world. We did not hear tonight of Moses and the giving of the Law and of how the children of Israel kept falling into sin. If we wanted to hear the whole story of why it was necessary for Christ to come to earth, we would be here for several days, maybe weeks.

We skipped up to Isaiah to a prophecy about Jesus. Isaiah prophesied to the children of Israel, most of whom were in a dark time, with the rest of them soon to be carried off to Babylon. He prophesied of their seeing a great light. Some might take that light to be the star over Bethlehem, but it really is Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, whom Isaiah tells us shall be called: **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

But the world did lie in darkness for more than 600 years from Isaiah’s time before an angel came to a young woman named Mary and told her that she would bear a child to whom she would give the name Jesus. Her question, Luke 1:34 **"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"** answers those who question the Virgin Birth of Jesus; and the angel’s answer is met, not with disbelief, but with righteous acceptance: Luke 1:38 **38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."** And so the need for the journey to Bethlehem with Mary great with child was set.

Shortly after He was born, the shepherds and the wise men came to see Him.

Not long after that that King Herod set out to kill him; and Joseph and Mary, after being warned by an angel, went to Egypt to escape Herod’s attempt to kill Jesus.

The last lesson from the Gospel of St. John is the one that tells us who Jesus Christ really is. He is God, and he is a man. He is the True Light that overcomes all darkness. St. John tells us He came to His own people, but they did not accept Him; but then he says, John 1:12 **But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.**

If we read farther on in the Bible, we learn that Jesus is in fact the Messiah the Jews had been hoping and praying for for many years. The Jews were in the same place many of us have been in. Have you ever prayed for something and either not gotten what you wanted, or you got

something you didn't want, or you went for a long time in which it seemed that God just didn't answer you at all. That's how the Jews were in regard to the Messiah; they had waited for a long time, and then what they got was not at all what they wanted or were expecting.

They were hoping for and expecting a mighty king like Saul who would be immortal and who would drive the Romans and all the other foreigners from their land. What they got was Jesus, Who most of the time was humble and taught a Gospel of nonviolence, and Who died, DIED, on the Cross. They thought He couldn't possibly have been the Messiah, that is until He rose from the dead.

Now you may ask what does bringing in Jesus' adult life and the Easter story have to do with Christmas? After all, Christmas is about the birth of a baby and is a holiday on which we place a great emphasis on life and children. Why do this?

The answer is that the Birth of Jesus leads inevitably to the Cross. In my reading yesterday, I came across a short piece I cannot go back and find about a painting by an artist I had never heard of depicting the Conception of Jesus. The picture was not shown, just a short description, which spoke of a beam of light from heaven, shining down on Mary, with Jesus coming down in the beam and bringing the Cross with Him! Jesus' Conception and Birth are just the beginning of the story of Salvation that ends, **not** with the Cross, but His Resurrection and Ascension. Because of our emphasis on the Cross and what Jesus did for mankind on the Cross by taking on our sins, some accuse Christians of putting an over-emphasis on Death. That is really a false accusation, because what we really emphasize is the Resurrection.

Every year at Christmas, I speak of Jesus as God's Christmas gift to us, to all mankind. And Jesus brought a gift with Him, the gift of salvation through faith in Him. Yes, Christmas is a time of the giving and receiving of gifts, and we have received the greatest and most valuable gift of all – from God – Salvation, Salvation to eternal life.

The message of Christmas is as simple as it is profound: Rejoice, for Jesus Christ is Born so that men might be saved from Death and enjoy eternal life with Him.

AMEN!