XMAS1(2023)

**ANNOUNCEMENTS: Merry Christmas, etc**

*"when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive time adoption of sons."*

Welcome to Christmas without Santa or reindeer. This is Christmas for REAL Christians. With some already taking down their trees and moving into football and New Year's Eve prep it can be a real challenge to keep the Spirit of Christmas going for another week.

 Since Thanksgiving we have been busy with present shopping, tree decorating and card writing to mention just a few. Christmas music has surrounded us everywhere to the point, at times, of cloying.

But now we have the chance to focus more on the birth of Christ, who had to wait until the Three Kings showed up before **he** got any presents. And part of the meaning of Christmas is found in the days immediately following it.

 In the Church year the days immediately following Christmas... are all red. They are red because we commemorate martyrs. On the 26th, just one day after singing about Bethlehem and the manger and "all is calm; all is bright", the Church commemorates St. Stephen its first deacon and also first martyr. Stephen was one of the seven deacons chosen to assist the Apostles in the earliest days along with Phillip. The name "Stephen" means “crown” and Stephen was the first to wear the crown of martyrdom after Jesus' **death**.

 The next day, the 27th, the church remembers St. John the Evangelist who also witnessed a vision of heaven like Stephen. It was a vision recorded in the writing of the *Book of Revelation*. John seems to have died in peace in the year 100 at the age of 94.

But John is honored nonetheless as a martyr for all that he endured beforehand under persecution from the Emperor Diocletion. He was miraculously saved from death after being tossed--as a very, very old man-- into a boiling cauldron.

 Then, on the 28th, only three days after Christmas the Church turns and also remembers all the Holy Innocents whom Herod the Great ordered killed in an attempt to destroy the newborn king of the Jews, Jesus. These innocent martyrs are unique in Christianity since they did not die for the Good News of Jesus', but literally for Jesus, in his place.

 While not a PB holy day, the twenty-ninth (Friday) the Church traditionally remembers St. Thomas a' Becket who, while archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral. He was slain near the high altar by followers of King Henry II in 1170 during vespers.

 Thus, we see in the few days after Christmas a display of the very reason why Jesus had to come into the world. As our seasonal collect puts it**:** he came to redeem those under the Law by becoming adopted sons of God. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, came because there was a lot of darkness and **violence** in the world after our Fall in Eden.

 He came to bring light, which violence hates. And as we hear in The Last Gospel, recited at the end of our Lessons & Carols last week, coming from the beginning of John's Gospel: the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness "comprehended" it not. In more modern English, the darkness could not overcome it.

St. John did not begin his Gospel with a birth narrative like Ss. Luke and Matthew. Rather, his Gospel supplies the **background** of Jesus BEFORE he was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King.

We see that Jesus, or "the Word", in Greek “*Low-gahs*”, was present at the beginning of the universe. He was **not** adopted later as many early divisive heresies put forward. He has existed both in time as Jesus and outside of time as the Word of God.

Even at his birth people beheld something special, his glory as a member of the Godhead. The shepherds in the fields on the night of his birth abiding their sheep witnessed a wondrous, glorious occurrence: the appearance of an angel who spoke to them.

 As an aside, the Great Temple in Jerusalem maintained its own flock of sacrificial sheep. Given that Bethlehem is nigh unto Jerusalem it is quite possible these witnesses of an angelic occurrence were shepherds who actually maintained the Temple flock! Fitting witnesses for the Lamb of God.

 In six days we shall see that three kings or wise men came following an unusual, glorious star. Both of these happened long **before** Jesus had worked his first miracle. From the very beginning of his life, throughout it, and then after his death, people were beholding his glory.

 What was the “glory”? The same as His Father's. His glory came because he was divine; the actual son of the Father. The word in Hebrew used for glory is “*shikena*” [shehk-key-na] and refers to the glory of God.

Now, there were only a couple of times during his earthly life when his majesty and glory were displayed overtly to others. The first was the glorious moment of his baptism when the heavens opened, the dove descended upon him and a voice from heaven thundered. The other was on the mountain when he was transfigured before a few of his chosen Apostles.

 Yet, during his life people witnessed the glory of God Almighty in Jesus in his teachings and healings. People were **amazed** because he “taught with authority”.

They were **incredulous** at his healings which were even more glorious by the fact that did them himself without praying out loud like other great prophets, such as Elijah. His **disciples** likewise were incredulous at his dominion over the forces of nature, such as walking on water and calming the sea, and amazed at his ability to take a little food and feed hordes of hungry people.

 Long after Jesus' earthly life **we** are witnesses to his glory. Probably during our lives we may have moments at church or elsewhere when we feel overwhelmed by His presence. Indeed, even those who are not Christian have been known to remark about the sense of presence and unusual peace near a church's tabernacle.

 But most commonly we witness his glory in our actions. Certainly if we do something dramatic such as save someone's life others are witnessing to others Christ's operation within us. But even a less dramatic action, such as returning a lost billfold displays Christ's presence in us. In such cases the grateful recipient is also amazed and incredulous. Christ's own glory becomes reflected in our own actions, others today behold HIS glory through us. And darkness can not overcome it.

 Since there are twelve days to this season I want to wish all, again, a very MERRY CHRISTMAS. Amem

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