

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?
Christmas Eve Meditation
December 24, 2012

Give or take a year, tomorrow is Christ's 2012th birthday. Not surprisingly, after all these centuries, fierce controversies still rage over the question, "What child is this, some claim was born to be the Savior of the world?"

I could lecture for hours about those, in every generation, who challenged the validity of the claim Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. Oddly enough the earliest skeptics in the first centuries didn't question Christ's divinity but they couldn't accept his humanity, which is ironic because 2,000 years later it's the other way around.

Today many would agree Jesus was a great humanitarian, and founder of one of the world's great religions, equal in status to the Buddha, Gandhi or Socrates, but in no way divine.

Certainly there's no way to rationally prove Jesus is the Son of God except to say, as C. S. Lewis put it, Jesus of Nazareth was either insanely delusional, a bold faced liar, or he really is who he said he is.

But even Lewis' apologetics won't satisfy those who'd still argue it wasn't Jesus who made these statements about himself, it was his disciples who later put these words in his mouth, outlandish claims that only innocent children and the simple minded could swallow.

But if this is true and the disciples did conspire to lie about Jesus' divinity, why would they be willing to die for a lie? The record shows, given the choice between rejecting their convictions or face death, they always chose to be martyred for their faith.

So, ultimately no matter how strong the case, made by either side, it all comes down to faith, believing the unbelievable if only because of that growing inner conviction that comes from above. But conviction still makes plenty of room for reason. Some of the most reasonable people who ever lived had the faith of a child. Quite a few of them even started out determined to debunk Christianity only to find themselves humbled and on their knees, bowing before the manger.

So what can we possibly say about this word "faith"? For starters, faith is a gift you can't give yourself, it can only be given to you and only be received by you.

So how and when does faith begin? That's hard to answer, but I can say when you listen attentively with an open mind to God revealing himself to you through the scriptures, that's when you hear the invitation to faith.

Tonight you are hearing selected verses from the Bible starting with the Old Testament prophets, who hundreds of years before Christ made statements regarding the necessity of this child, his credentials, his mission, even his birthplace to prepare the way for Christ to be born. Then, in the years immediately after Jesus' resurrection, the Gospel writers searched and unmined these same prophecies, showing how each was fulfilled in Emmanuel, God with us in the flesh born to win salvation for the world.

Certainly it doesn't take faith to see the world needs salvation. The world Christ was born into is little changed over the last 2,000 years. Maybe science and technology makes our standard of living better, and man's capacity to think new thoughts expanded our horizons has made, in some cases, society more humane, but no one has even been able to invent or legislate the absence of envy, hatred, greed, lust or any of the other seven deadly sins. Despite the best efforts of some and because of the best efforts of others, the world continues to be corrupted by cruelty, prejudice and oppression, even though God gave us the gift of his Son, the Prince of Peace. Why? Remember what I said, a gift can only be given, but also only received. Unfortunately there's always enough people determined to reject the gift, because to receive it has consequences: you must repent, literally turn away from a lifestyle of grasping and taking and turn towards Christ who helps you release and give yourself away to others, working for justice and peace, making yourself available to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and befriend the stranger, because by grace and through faith, Christ is born in you and you are reborn in Christ.

You may wonder why if Christ is the Prince of Peace and the savior of the world how then can anyone explain the horror of Newtown, Connecticut, the slaughter of innocent children? Honestly, I don't know any more than when I read Matthew's Gospel report of King Herod, fearing the wisemen's news that a new king was born in Bethlehem, ordered the slaughter of all the boys in Bethlehem under two years of age, hoping the Christ Child would be one of them.

So there's never any satisfactory answer to the reality of evil; any attempt to explain it away falls short. But from the faith perspective we can say this, somehow God is with us when we suffer, whether or not we realize it. What's more Christ's suffering on the cross tells us God suffers along with us. But we can also say with confidence for every crucifixion we experience in life, there's always the promise of resurrection and new life. How can that be true? Because "God so loved the world that he gave his only son and those who believe in him will not perish, but have eternal life."

Of course, no one can prove what I say is true. But I can encourage you to look long and hard into the manger until you see that child, born to redeem humanity. It's only Christ's birth into this horrible mess we've made of the world that the power of evil will surely be trumped by the power of God.

And so, on this holy night of wonder and mystery as angelic voices from above speak to us wherever we may be, by the grace of God hear and receive the Good News that Christ our savior is born.