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Christmas 2011

# The Messenger

of St James' Church, Texarkana, Texas

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## From the Rector

Christmas is a time of miracles, or so the saying goes. There are some who find *everything* miraculous: from sunsets to babies to the fact that they could find a parking space at the mall! Other people see *nothing* miraculous: the world can be fully explained, and even the completely extraordinary is mere coincidence. There are even some who profess a belief in God who say the age of miracles has passed. Of course, God and miracles go together as supernatural Actor and supernatural act!

Here is the ultimate miracle: In the silent watches of the first Christmas night, God Omnipotent, the King of kings and Lord of lords became, just like you and me, a human being, a man. God surrenders his power to become a helpless infant. The One who lives in eternity binds himself to a specific time and place to reveal to us the depths of his love and forgiveness.

Most of you will have heard the Christmas Carol *Silent Night*. Joseph Mohr, its author, was abandoned by his father before he was born, and his mother was forced to eke out a meager living by knitting sweaters, caps and socks. He entered seminary, and in 1815 became a priest of the diocese of Salzburg, Austria. The bishop assigned Fr Mohr to a mountain parish. One quiet evening the young priest sat down and composed a brief poem. Some two years later, he showed it to a friend named Franz Gruber, who provided a melody.

At the Midnight Mass in 1818, Fr Mohr's small parish heard the hymn for the first time. It spread quickly and was sung in America for the first time in 1839.

*Silent Night, Holy Night  
All is calm, all is bright...  
Silent night, holy night  
Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from Thy holy face  
With the dawn of redeeming grace  
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth  
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.*

Fr Joseph Mohr lived another thirty years after writing his poem. In spite of the hymn's popularity, the composer died penniless. He had spent his earnings as a parish priest to care for the elderly.

The true Miracle of Christmas is the Gift of the Christ Child. In this season of giving, it is surely a great joy to receive a present and an even greater joy to be able to give one. Life itself is obviously a very great gift. None of us created our own self or thought up our own existence. Everything we enjoy depends on the initial gift of life.

Yet there is an even greater gift. That is what we celebrate at Christmas. We experience life as a combination of longings and limitations. We each have a hidden self which we wish to reveal to someone who can really understand and embrace us. That Someone does exist. We celebrate his birth at Christmas.

A young man, who never knew his own father, experienced that embrace. On a lonely night he wrote a beautiful poem about that experience. We normally sing only three stanzas of Joseph Mohr's hymn, but the original poem had six stanzas. The last is one we usually do not hear:

*Silent night! Holy night!  
God's Son laughs, O how bright.*

*Love from your holy lips shines clear,  
As the dawn of salvation draws near,  
Jesus, Lord, with your birth!  
Jesus, Lord, with your birth!*

That Christ Jesus came among us to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world is the true Miracle of Christmas, of which all of our trimmings are but tokens and reminders.

The parish clergy and staff join me in wishing you and yours a very happy Christmas.



The Rev'd Douglas Anderson, Rector

### Christian Education Notes

#### **NATIVITY PAGEANT rehearsals.**

Sunday, Dec. 11, following 10:00 mass, lunch provided in the Great Hall. We need all children who can possibly be there, **and** their parents, for script distribution, music run through and costume discussion. Following that, those children without speaking parts may leave. Those with speaking parts will stay for a quick run through.

Monday, Dec. 19, in the church, 6:00pm for speaking parts (know your parts), and 6:45pm for all others.

Friday, Dec. 23, in the church, 6:00 for all with costumes and all parts memorized, ready for a final dress rehearsal.

**Sunday morning** Christian Education classes are in recess until January 8<sup>th</sup>.

**The Wednesday evening** Mass, class and program resumes on January 11<sup>th</sup>.

**THE MEN OF ST JAMES/BROTHERHOOD OF ST ANDREW** will meet on Tuesday, December 20<sup>th</sup> at 6pm, both to enjoy one another's company at supper, and to help the Altar Guild decorate the church for Christmas. All men of the parish are invited!

**THE VESTRY MEETS** on Monday, December 19<sup>th</sup> at 5:30pm.

### Call for 2012 Parish Office Nominations

Each year, it is the privilege and responsibility of the members of our parish family to elect persons to serve as Members of Vestry and Delegates to Diocesan Convention.

Members of Vestry, presided over by the Rector, share in the governance of the parish, with particular responsibility for the property and financial resources of the parish, and serve for a three year term.

Diocesan Convention delegates represent our parish at the annual Diocesan Convention, and serve for a one year term.

The Vestry is soliciting nominations for Members of Vestry and Delegates to Diocesan Convention.

The annual parish meeting will be held on Sunday, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012 after the 10:00am Mass. To be included in the Annual meeting booklet, nomination forms must be returned to the Parish Office by Sunday, January 8<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Expectations for those Nominated for Vestry**

*In the Diocese of Dallas, to be eligible to serve in an elected office, one must be at least eighteen (18) years of age, a confirmed communicant in good standing of the Church, and a financial contributor of record for at least one (1) year before the election takes place.*

*The canons of the Church define "in good standing" as those who are faithful at worship, and praying, working and giving for the Kingdom of God. "Confirmed" means having been Confirmed or Received by a bishop of this Church, or a bishop in Communion with it.*

1. To live a life reflecting the Christian faith and to strive to grow spiritually through worship, prayer and ministry to the parish and the wider community.
2. To regularly attend the public worship of the Church. That is, absences from worship will be the exception, rather than the rule.
3. To attend meetings of the Vestry and any commission or board to which assigned.
4. To work for openness and unity amongst the clergy, Vestry and congregation.



## Explore! Anglican Essentials

## The Prayer Book & The Bible

By Fr Nathan L. Bostian, 2005

Are you interested in exploring what it means to be an Anglican Christian? Our annual inquirer's class, for those considering membership at St James' and Confirmation / Reception into the Anglican Communion, and refresher for everyone else We will begin on Sunday, February 26<sup>th</sup> (Lent I) in the Great Hall at 9am. Taught by Fr Anderson, this class investigates such topics as:

- What is a catholic, an Anglican, an Episcopalian?
- A brief outline of the English Church history.
- What is the Gospel (the Good News?)
- Worship & the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism & Confirmation
- The "Three-legged Stool:" Scripture, Tradition and Reason
- The Holy Eucharist
- The Church: One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic
- Bishops, Priests & Deacons The Precepts of the Church: What the Church expects of her members

### What is the Anglican Communion?

The **Diocese of Dallas** is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, a fellowship of some 80-million Christians throughout the world. The **Anglican Communion** is the third largest grouping of Chrstians in the world, after the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

There is no single "Anglican Church" since each national or regional church has autonomy; as the name suggests, rather, the Anglican *Communion* is an association of these churches in full with each other and particularly with Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England, which may be regarded as the "mother church" of the worldwide communion.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, religious head of the Church of England, has no formal authority outside that country; but is recognized as a symbolic head for the worldwide communion. Among the other primates, he is *primus inter pares*, or *first among equals*.

For Anglican Christians, the Book of Common Prayer is essential because it unifies us in our common life in Christ. In Scripture we are told to be "of one mind" and pray "in harmony" with other Christians (*see Phil 2:2; Mat 18:18-20*). The Bible tells us that there is much power in praying together and seeking God together as God's Family. The practical way that we do this is by praying out of the same book. Our Prayer Book is not the only way to pray, but it is like a "school of prayer", that teaches us how other wise and godly Christians have prayed before us. By praying their prayers, our prayer life is shaped. And as our prayers are shaped, so also our beliefs are shaped. And these beliefs will in turn shape the way we live our lives.

Ancient Christians used to use a Latin phrase to describe this. It said "Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi". This means that "The way we pray shapes our beliefs, and the way we believe shapes our lives". We are transformed by how we pray and how we live life with God, because that is what prayer is: living life with God! We can either try to learn how to pray on our own, or get help from wise people who lives before us. It is kind of like riding a bike. We can either learn with training wheels and the help of older people, or we can learn on our own. The Prayer Book is our "training wheels" to help us learn to pray effectively.

To understand the Book of Common Prayer, you must first understand the major themes that it is organized around. It was not just invented from nothing in 1979 (when our current prayer book was first published), or even in 1549 (when the first English prayer book was published). Instead, it is built from centuries of tradition that stretch back to the writing of the Psalms in the Old Testament. In fact, about 80% of the Prayer Book itself is composed from Scripture or paraphrases of Scripture. When you are praying from the Prayer Book, you are praying from Scripture which has been re-organized to meet the daily, weekly, and yearly spiritual needs of God's people. □



## Christmas & the Self-Emptying of God

There was a report recently about a second-grade special needs child in a Massachusetts public school who, when asked to draw a something about Christmas for one of his classes, drew a stick-figure picture of Jesus upon the Cross. The teacher deemed the picture “violent,” and the boy was immediately subjected to a forced psychological evaluation before he could return to class.

“A rather odd illustration,” you think. Perhaps. But the Church Fathers remind us that the events of our Lord’s Nativity are a foreshadowing of the events of Good Friday. Just think: Jesus was born in a cave, later to be buried in a cave. Wrapped in swaddling clothes by his Blessed Mother in Bethlehem, later to be wrapped in a burial shroud. No room for him in the inn at his birth, later to be buried in a borrowed tomb at this death. The babe who lies in a carefully constructed manger constructed of wood and nails will later be fastened with nails to the hard wood of the Cross. So that 8 year old autistic boy who drew the picture of the Cross was onto something! As the Psalmist says (8:2), “Out of the mouths of infants and children, thou hast brought perfect praise.”

We all have these images in our heads of a cozy stable, surrounded by meek and gently lowing animals and all too easily forget the reality of a cave, the draughts, the smell – can you imagine the floor?! And the cold.

We are told that Saint Francis created the first live nativity to show to the people of the time the *reality* of the Incarnation. He wanted the poor themselves to identify with the Christ: a tableau which brought to life the hardship of God *emptying himself out* into this world.

In the words of the Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:5-11): *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.*

This is called Paul’s *kenotic hymn*, from the Greek, *kenosis*, or self-emptying. The Church has us read this passage on Good Friday, when we think of Jesus emptying himself out on the Cross. But let us not forget that Christ Jesus, the Incarnate Word of the Father, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity,

emptied himself, took on our human flesh, and stepped down into our world on this very night, some 2000-plus years ago.

This is what Christmas is all about. Christmas is not only a yearly commemoration of the birthday of Jesus. Christmas celebrates the Incarnation, or enfleshment of God. Jesus is God in skin—our skin. As we say in the Creed: *He is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God ... For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, ... he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.*

The Baby in the manger is the *means* by which this happened, but Christmas celebrates the *event* of the Incarnation.

The most radical idea in this or any other faith in the world is the awesome, unlikely, challenging notion that God should so love us, that he would give it all up and step into this world. Not “direct from afar”, not “send angels” or “send prophets” but come amongst us. A risky gesture, an acceptance of the vulnerability that makes up our lives.

In other words, this God-with-us, this Emmanuel, was not in charge, but subject. Subject to all of the sensations, emotions, challenges of our lives. He was like us in all things but sin.

Remember this when you’re angry or frustrated with God for stuff that’s happened in your life: the loss of someone you love, illness, change, turmoil, the very nature of what appears to be a cruel world. Ask yourself why you still choose to shake your fist as the skies when he experienced it all too: loss, poverty, hardship, seeking asylum, and being reviled for who he was and what he had to say of God’s love.

Christ Jesus has been there before you. He knows what you experience, and he still loves you, no matter who you are, what you have done, what you are going through.

Tonight, as we lay the bambino in the wood of the manger, and we gaze around at all the candles in this warm room, we should remind ourselves of the reality of this miracle: of God choosing *himself* to empty himself and to be a part of us; to be one of us.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son ...” God loves us. God loves you. And what could I possibly add to that? □

## **Christ Masses at St James'**

*Sunday, December 18<sup>th</sup>*

**THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT: Sunday of Our Lady**

Low Mass at 7:45am

Sung Mass at 10am

¶ *Christian Education classes are in recess.*

*Saturday, December 24<sup>th</sup>*

**EVE OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD**

Pageant & Family Mass at 4:30pm

Procession & Sung Mass at 10:30pm

¶ *Christmas Carols & Music at 10pm.*

*Sunday, December 25<sup>th</sup>*

**CHRISTMAS DAY**

Low Mass at 9:30am (1928 BCP)

*Sunday, January 1<sup>st</sup>*

**THE CIRCUMCISION & NAMING OF JESUS**

Low Mass at 7:45am

Sung Mass at 10:00am

¶ *Christian Education classes are in recess.*