



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord and Saviour *Commonly called Christmas, December 24/25th, 2013*

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

This year – for the umpteenth in a row – we have been bombarded for months with news stories about the War Against Christmas. However when you come to analyze matters, as wars go, it has not been notably successful for the folks who've been waging it.

Not least, it seems that for every community that sees its Christmas tree or manger scene banished from its public square, another two or three communities are inspired by the loss to put up a Christmas tree or manger scene of their own.

What's more, there seems to be no more effective way to put the word "Christmas" on everybody's lips than to demand it be abolished. Even when the anti-Christmas Grinches actually succeed in imposing their whiney little "happy holidays" on the public airwaves, politicians and store clerks, everybody knows it really means "Merry Christmas." Thus it seems the Grinches of the anti-Christmas Movement simply can't win.

This presents us with a problem. It is really not very Christian to feel triumphalist about this. It might be tempting to taunt the Grinches with comments like: "See if you can do better next year!" But the fact of the matter is Christians are commanded always to be charitable, and Christmas is the time of the year when a lack of Charity is more painfully obvious than any other.

Stick in the craw though it might, Christmas is the time of year for Christians to try their very best to show Christian charity towards the anti-Christmas Grinches – to understand them and to feel their pain.

It is difficult, of course, for Christians or any one else for that matter to understand kill-joys. The fact of the matter is that nobody's obliged to celebrate Christmas. So why on earth should the Grinches object to other folks celebrating something they do not?

Could the answer be that they can't stand the thought of other people being happy when they feel miserable?

Okay, so that's not a very charitable thought. But could it be that they find it impossible to believe God would want to redeem people like us who fall so far short of his standards of holiness by giving Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son to take the rap?

Could it be that because they find this hard to believe, they resent other people taking comfort from believing it – and this, somehow, engenders a resentment against God?

In all honesty, such disbelief and the resentment it might engender is to some degree understandable. The very notion of God coming down as a little baby – the most vulnerable creature imaginable – to redeem mankind is not just counter intuitive, it's

counter to all commonsense. Even the most stupid of human beings wouldn't be so naïvely trusting as that.

And that's the problem: Human beings simply wouldn't "do an incarnation" this way. I'm not saying they'd do things better. That's blasphemy. But humans would probably put some market research into it. You know the sort of thing: They'd call in a management consultant, or, better yet, one of those big public relations firms.

The first things to go, of course, would be the hokey carpenter and his significant other. The horny-handed son of toil shtick might work with Country and Western Music, but you'll need something a bit more up market for the redemption of mankind.

I mean why would anyone to look for the Saviour of the World in a row house in Cockeysville, let alone a stable in Bethlehem. Sure, the White House is a bit of a cliché, but, from the human perspective, if you are looking for the Saviour of the World, it makes more sense to search the White House, or the Kremlin even, than a stable.

Take the Three Wise Men. Where did they go first? King Herod's Royal Palace. That, I submit, is the place any reasonable human being would look for the King of the Jews – not some lock-up garage in the boondocks.

But, actually, the entire Jewish bit would have to go – not for any anti-Semitic reason, I hasten to add. It simply isn't practical giving a vital job like saving the human race to an ethnic minority, especially one that's so unpopular in so many quarters today. The Chinese or Indians would make much more suitable Messiahs. But, come to think of it, a Brit would make the appropriate Messiah of all.

No, that's not because I'm British. It's because Britain is ethnically diverse. Every ethnic group on earth is lives there. And, besides, English is the world's most widely spoken language. Think how convenient it would be to combine salvation for yourself and your loved ones with a visit to Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London.

It's a pity God never seems to consult human beings about such things. After all, what's intrinsically wrong with combining a plan for our salvation with the profit motive? Imagine the revenue the new plan would generate for the travel business alone.

The downside is the plan doesn't take account of that messy business of free will. For reasons best known to him self, God created humans with the ability to think for themselves, which means, of necessity, they have the option of accepting his love or rejecting it. But, under the plan I've just outlined, this option would be off the table.

If the King of England – or the Tsar of Russia or the President of the United States, for that matter – were to save mankind, he'd do it by Executive Order or an act of Parliament or an act of Congress. And Executive Orders and acts of Congress do not leave room for free will. Either you obey – or it's the pokey.

That's a serious stumbling block. For some reason God wants us to have free will. And if he made salvation compulsory, he would rob us of that very quality that defines our humanity. This is why God doesn't do things by Executive Order. Rather than deprive us of our free will, God did something amazingly loving and amazingly generous – something no sane human being would dream of doing.

God sent us his only begotten Son to pay the price for our willfulness and ingratitude. And to demonstrate how much he loves us, he sent him to live as one of us – to start life on earth as human baby, the most vulnerable creature of all.

As St. John puts it: "So God loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Now that's the most comforting Christmas present of all. It's so sad the Grinches can't bring themselves to take comfort in it. *AMEN* – and, from all of us at St. Stephen's, a very merry Christmas to you all.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.