



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 25th, 2014

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

People have cudged their brains, wondering what God looks like from the time Adam and Eve got themselves kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Moses, for example, had met God as a Burning Bush, but it wasn't quite the same thing as meeting him in person. So towards the end of a long and distinguished career as God's servant, he asked God to show him his face.

"You can't do that, Moses," God told him, "If you met me face to face, it would kill you. All I can do is show you my back. You'll have to be satisfied with that." And Moses, as far as we can tell, uncomplainingly accepted his decision.

The Prophet Isaiah also wondered what God was like. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways," God told him, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Such ponderings about the nature of God were by no means solely confined to the Jewish patriarchs and prophets. The pagan world was fascinated by the subject no less than Jews. And probably because pagans had never actually been introduced to him, their speculations about God tended to be creative in the extreme – outrageous even.

Indeed, it is difficult to get more creative than the Phoenicians. Their primary god – known in his various incarnations as Dagon, Melqat, Moloch or Chemosh – was a fire god who required constant appeasement with child sacrifice. Excavations at the site of the city of Carthage have yielded more than 20,000 urns containing the pitiful remains of

infants under two years old that had been sacrificed as burnt offerings on his altars.

The Greeks and the Romans abhorred human sacrifice. But they imagined not just a single all-powerful God, but a whole host of them. What's more, they pictured them in the main as human beings writ large – immortal, of course, and endowed with virtually limitless power, but as capricious, ruthless and self-absorbed as the most tyrannical dictator or the meanest movie star.

An unfortunate hunter named Achtaeon accidentally happened on a spring where Artemis the Huntress (Diana to the Romans) was bathing in the nude. In a grisly act of revenge, the goddess turned Achtaeon into a stag. Then the miserable female set his own hounds on him and they tore him to pieces.

Zeus (the Roman Jupiter), the king of the gods, was, generally speaking, not so blood-thirsty. But he was utterly unprincipled in an entirely different direction – in his carnal pursuit of cute young humans, male and female. None of them were ever safe from him. There they'd be, minding their own business, when suddenly he'd turn up disguised as a swan or some such and have his wicked ways with them.

Small wonder, then that the more intelligent Greeks and Romans stopped believing in gods and goddesses completely. However, Aristotle, one of the most intelligent human beings who has ever lived, had a sneaking suspicion that it was decidedly unlikely this immensely logical and ordered world of ours was the consequence of a

vast cosmic accident. Order, after all, does not usually arise from chaos. Thus he decided to explore whether or not there is an “intelligence” behind creation with one of the most sophisticated scientific instrument that has ever existed – his brain.

His conclusions were that certainly there had to be an “intelligence” (in short, a God) behind creation, but that, because of the properties, capabilities and abilities the act of creation would require, he would be utterly unknowable to human beings unless he chose to reveal himself to us.

This, of course, brings us to the baby in the stable at Bethlehem, whose birthday we are celebrating today. Nothing could be more calculated to confirm Aristotle’s analysis of the situation than that child lying in the manger.

No mere mortal could possibly imagine the all-powerful creator of the universe coming to visit his people – to redeem them no less – as something as weak and helpless as a new born baby.

In view of the task before him, it makes no earthly sense at all. Besides, who in their right mind, when they had any other alternative, would place themselves at the mercy of creatures as ruthlessly self-absorbed and self-serving as human beings?

It was something King Herod and his Jewish subjects found difficult to grasp – and they’d had the best part of two thousand years to prepare for his First Coming. And it is still difficult for most of us today to come to terms with – and we’ve had two thousand years more to prepare for his Second Coming. But then the very people he’d lived with and taught for three long years failed to understand what he was about or even who he really was.

At the Last Supper, Jesus made a final attempt to explain to his disciples who he was and the nature of his mission. “If you had known me, you should have known my father also,” he told them, “And from henceforth, you know him, and have seen him.”

The Apostle Philip, who was no more obtuse than the rest of them, then said: “Lord, then show us the Father, and it will suffice.”

Jesus replied: “Have I been with you so long a

time, and yet you haven’t known me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you then say, ‘Show us the Father?’ ”

The incredible truth is the that baby lying in that manger is God incarnate – the great, all-powerful, all knowing, all wise, omnipresent creator of the universe. It is, to be sure, extraordinarily difficult for us, human beings to apprehend. The notion that the Creator would sacrifice himself for his creation is entirely alien to us. It would be a rather like human beings laying down their lives for mice, or even earthworms. Unthinkable! Outlandish!

But before we dismiss it entirely, it’s worth remembering how he told us to show our regard for him, how we should worship him, how we should love him. Jesus was asked – quite frequently we might assume – which were the most important Commandments in the Law. This is not an unreasonable question as there are 613 of them in the Torah, some clearly more important than the others.

Jesus summarized the meaning of all 613 Commandments, by saying: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with your mind and with all your soul, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment and the second means exactly the same thing: You shall love you neighbor as much as you love yourself. All of Holy Scripture hangs on these two commandments.” In other words, God wants you to show your love for him by loving your fellow men – an act of the most amazing humility.

In much the same vein, he told us the best way to make sure his Second Coming doesn’t take us by surprise is to treat every human being we meet as though he or she were Jesus, himself. And this has a special significance at Christmastide. For it enables us to see in the face of every single babe in arms something that Moses, the Patriarch, was unable to see.

It brings us face to face with the babe in the manger at Bethlehem – face to face with the great Creator of Heaven and Earth; face to face with the God incarnate who “so 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.” And that should make for a very merry Christmas indeed. *AMEN.*