

It seems we can no longer approach the Nativity as a matter of sacred truth.

Everywhere in our world the secularizing dawn has shed a harsh light of self-consciousness, of suspicion, on the very narrative plot we gather to recount tonight. Even though we gather in a sacred space, it has—in our memory, in our lifetime—even it has changed. We have become disenchanted as a society. We've had to make our own peace with Christmas within the meanings and traditions that once supported our approach with all the numinous transcendence of a shared moment of glorious unity. Of course, we have also lived our own lives, through disappointments, disillusionments, and losses of all kinds involving work and career, marriage and family, friendship and loyalty. We likewise have had to manage this process of disenchantment, to come to terms with a reality that is not what the story we've heard and faithfully believed approved and promised.

So Christmas for us is a complex cultural and individual nexus of emotion, expectation and demand—a kind of bubbling caldron of desire as at the shepherds' mid-winter campfire. Our approach to it is carefully negotiated through years of experience. Advent means literally “approach.” And because of our mixed experience with it, We have a certain approach/avoidance dynamic around Christmas.

It is like approaching an ancient city. I think of the wonderful medieval Spanish city of Toledo. Have you ever been to that wonderful place, the home of the great painter El Greco. You approach Toledo from a stone bridge across a river with a gorge on your left and a vast verdant plain on your right. In olden times the curve of the river allowed the city protection from attackers. Once across, the steep climb into the old city begins with changing vistas at every corner dominated by the huge Alcazar looming above.

At the top of the hill surrounded by buildings, villas, palaces and shops all crowded together to make use of every available space, stands a vast cathedral, whose beauty is impossible to take in from the street because there is no place away from you that you can stand to look. You are always caught up in the narrow streets surrounding it from which you can see only a part of it. At every turn up the steep ascent you hope to see the whole thing before you, but always you are frustrated. Even in the square at the main entrance you can only see the facade, no three dimensional depth.

Even in our attempts to proclaim at that most satisfied moment of our holiday celebration, surrounded by friends and family, “Aw, this is it! This is what Christmas is all about,” our view is always limited, frustrated by pieces of our life, losses, regrets, missed opportunities, difficult or alienated relationships that seem to block our view, to limit our whole-hearted approach. Our childish naivete is shattered, we've become secularized, we've been disenchanted. While we used to throw ourselves into it, we've become like cautious cheering spectators. So we say, “Christmas is for children,” and learn to hope to recover the joy second hand through them.

Like the shepherds we have come here tonight to “see” this thing that has taken place. To gawk at the manger. Yet our view is blocked. And thus it seems to have been for ages. Helena the mother of the Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity legal throughout the empire, was the one who invented pilgrimage by establishing the original sites of the birth (the Church of the Nativity) and the resurrection (the Holy Sepulcher) which still have significance as holy sites and tourist attractions. The Byzantine Church and then Orthodox developed the form of the icon, whereby more than seeing one might—by ones own desire—be drawn beyond the surface of a flat rendering of such a scene and into the divine life it pictured. St. Francis of Assisi first established a way of representing the scene at the birth by placing between a live ox and a donkey the manger that would become the altar for the Christmas Eve Mass. Its very simplicity was an attempt to draw the viewer beyond their attachment to the mythological grandeur of a divine birth to our direct human experience, to help us to recognize, by a kind of disenchantment, the holiness of the poor, of animals, and of the creation itself, into which God on this night was born.



A tourist inside the cathedral at Toledo I was somewhat disappointed. At first I was overwhelmed by entering through a side door into a vastness I had not imagined from my approach to it. Where the outside was crowded with shops and buildings on streets so narrow and winding that they were like a labyrinth, once I entered this door, the interior space opened up before me. It was like a different world. But even so there was a curious reminder of everyday life. Throughout the cathedral itself there was construction going on. Machinery and dust and noise filled the vast space. It was disorienting to say the least until,

following a tour, I entered the sacristy, a familiar room, but about the size of this church, with wooden cabinets and vestment drawers.

The walls, like a crowded annex of the Prado in Madrid, were filled with huge renaissance paintings of Christ and the saints. Titian, Tintoretto, Rubens and El Greco whose home this Cathedral must have been and whose gigantic “The Disrobing of Christ” dominates one end of the room. In it Jesus, standing in rapt attention gazing into the heavens is surrounded by a mob of anguished and confused faces, about to be stripped of a red robe for crucifixion. In the foreground his cross is being inscribed with its title.



El Greco’s “The Adoration of the Shepherds” arranges remarkably realistic barefoot human figures around an ethereal landscape with angels floating above and the tiny but luminous baby and mother slightly off center. Mary is holding the corners of a white swaddling cloth in which she is to wrap the baby. These two bookends of the life of Jesus are not common subjects for Christian religious paintings. But by choosing them as themes the painter is telling us something about how to look. We’re used to the adoration of the Magi but this busy arrangement of awkward common bodies seems indelicate given the subject, until we recognize that it is intended to invite us into the scene. If these out of place shepherds and uncomfortable angels can gaze upon the infant, then so can we. It invites us into the picture. It is an invitation to participate, to lose our status as tourists and on-looking strangers and draw near with the shepherds to worship.

And we may expect to see the crucifixion portrayed but not a gigantic canvas of Christ being stripped of his garments. Yet in the painting the turmoil surrounding the serene figure of Christ having his now red swaddling clothes about to be ripped from his body is likewise intended to make us recognize ourselves in that blood-thirsty crowd of faces. Here we have the side pieces of an altar triptych installation intended to focus our attention by way of surprise on something about the Eucharist that we are not so used to seeing.

That is that the Eucharist is not a spectator sport.

By the turn of the seventeenth century the counter-reformation was already in full swing and the Inquisition, had taken its toll on Spanish society. The Mass, or as we call it today the Eucharist, had long since become for the faithful an occasion of visual adoration, of seeing the priest and the priest alone receive the bread and wine on behalf of the faithful. It had become a spectator sport. By being seen among the gathered and seeing the host elevated and consumed at a distance, the faithful were made to feel safe from the ravages of religion. But El Greco is calling for participation, for joining the shepherds at the manger and then in eating the bread for recognizing our guilt and forgiveness in the Christ who is handed over as if in a kind of “auto da fe” to be stripped, tortured and executed.

Tonight we come to see what the angels reported to us as Good News, but more than that we come to receive Christ in the form of bread, to be fed like the animals from the manger in Bethlehem which means literally, “House of Bread.” But there is no distant or detached eating of this bread for our own sake, just as there can be no celebration of Christmas for our own warm private spiritual benefit. In the same way, as Scrooge reminds us, there can be no celebration of Christmas without sharing with Tiny Tim and Bob Cratchet. Because by eating the bread of communion we do not so much change Christ into us, assimilated him into our own flesh and blood, but he transforms us into Him. Our ego self is not so much strengthened to be a better person, more like Christ, as it is stripped like a garment from us, and we broken to be united with, taken up into the Body of Christ. We become one Body in Him, part of a new community, and with all those with whom Christ is also one, the poor and the suffering. So we can not remain tourists at the creche, but by taking the bread and wine we are offering ourselves to be taken by God to be used as Christ was for the Life of the World.

We practice a form of what is known as “open communion” here at St. Stephen’s that actively invites everyone, no matter what your background, your religious status, or beliefs to join us in doing more than watching, but to come forward to take the bread and wine. But I need to, for the sake of full disclosure, to warn you. You cannot take the bread and wine on your “own terms,” as it were; you cannot receive Christ as a detached tourist, as a passive spectator, for in receiving Christ you will be changed and become Christ. In taking the bread tonight you yourselves will become bread offered for the Life of the World.