

Christmas I Sermon 1 by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

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“God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.”

How is your Christmas spirit holding out? Have you had enough of carols on elevators? Are you ready for the children to go back to school? Are you already planning your New Year's diet?

There are always the most touching stories of expressions of that Christmas spirit. Some of the most moving of these are accounts of war-time truces, when enemies who were just hours before trying to kill each other, instead greet each other in some recognition of a common humanity and lot. For a moment, for a day, there seems to be some hope for peace and good will. Yet, those accounts and many of our own experiences, show that that

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Christmas spirit is short-lived. The soldiers return to their sides and resume fire, and the family truce might not even last through all of dinner. Christmas is meant to change us, radically, and if we are back to our old selves already, then we missed the message, the Gospel of Christmas and its power.

Our Christmas Collect speaks of this radical change, put in the most extreme terms, terms which our Lord himself gave us. The Collect speaks of our being regenerate, which means being born again. In the birth of Jesus, all of humanity is offered this new beginning. When he is born, we may be born again. This is, of course, what St. John gives us in his theological prologue: "as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his Name, which were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

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What is missing from Christmas for many of us is that power. John, Luke and Matthew each bring their special gift to Jesus, in telling of his coming and birth. They are like three wise men, offering their distinctive gifts to our God and Saviour and King. And they each tell the story from a different perspective.

We begin Christmas with the eagle's eye view of St. John. We see the story from God's point of view, the details of time and place are assumed in eternity, and we hear simply the Word was made flesh.

St. Luke tells the story more from the perspective of our Lord's mother. He tells us about the angel's visit to Mary, and the details of where the child was actually born, what he wore, where he slept.

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Finally, today Matthew presents his Christmas Gospel. He tells us about this Jesus, who will save his people from their sins, who is God with us. St. Matthew gives us much more of Joseph's perspective. He recounts the angel's visit to Joseph, assuring him about how these things can be. It is through Joseph that the holy name is given, Jesus.

Joseph is someone I think that church-going people can easily identify with. He is in a hard place. It was not customary 2000 years ago to marry someone while they were carrying someone else's child. Joseph was humiliated and dishonoured by Mary's surprise pregnancy and the fanciful stories about visits from angels, and her supposed virginity would only fuel the gossip mill and make him more of a ridicule. But Joseph is a fair and gentle person. He will not seek retribution. He will

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simply and quietly call it off and send her away. Here is a generous justice and a gentle man.

Yet, while Joseph's big heart and patience are commendable, God will require even more of Joseph. More than his generosity and kindness, God will require of him, as of Mary, an unprecedented act of faith. We are like Joseph, convinced that kindness and generosity are important, maybe even convinced that love is the highest virtue. But to believe that that which is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Ghost, and that the Son she brings forth is Immanuel - God with us - and that he shall save his people from their sins, is beyond our ability to swallow.

You see, what God requires of you today is what he required of Joseph long ago: faith. Faith that the child born of the Virgin Mary is Immanuel and our Saviour. This is to believe

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the unbelievable, and to believe what most of us never have dared to believe in case it was not true, that God so loved the world. That faith will conquer all our fears. That faith is the means whereby we receive the power. For those who will receive Jesus as the Word made flesh, Immanuel, the Saviour, to them God gives the power to become his children. That power is given to them, St. John says, who believe on his Name, and his name is Jesus (which means “the Lord saves”) for he shall save his people from their sins.

That power of our adoption and rebirth as God's children is the Holy Spirit. So St. Paul tells us that we are no more just servants or slaves - we are now God's children. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus shares the unique honour and glory and inheritance and riches and privilege of his sonship with us. By the Holy Spirit, we are, and we know ourselves as, God's children. By

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the Holy Spirit, God is, and we know him as, our Father. By the Holy Spirit, we are, and we know each other as, God's children, brothers and sisters to one another. The Spirit of Christmas is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It was by the Holy Spirit that the Virgin Mary conceived in her womb. It is by the same Holy Spirit that we are brought to life as God's children, and that we live and love as such.

The power that is missing, and the spirit which will not fade as we pack up the tree and decorations, is the Spirit of God and of his Christ. On our own, we shall always discover ourselves incapable of living up to the general aspirations of good will that surface at this time of year. It is not in my power to live as God's child, nor in yours. But it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we may. This is not something you can be guiled into. All the sermons in the world will not make any

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difference. So our Christmas prayer is that we may be daily, every day, renewed in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we who are God's children might live as God's children. This is the week of New Year's resolutions, another lesson, year after year of our powerlessness and need for grace. Perhaps this enormous resolution will be enough for all of us: to seek by the Holy Spirit to live more fully and freely with one another as God's beloved children. For if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. +