

Christmas and the Sacred

Religion is about reconnecting to what we hold sacred. And what we hold sacred is what orients and grounds us, what defines who we are and who we aspire to become. What we hold sacred is what gives our lives their meaning and purpose.

We Christians understand the sacred in personal terms. Our God is not a principle like Freedom or Justice but a person, *someone* with whom we can have an intimate relationship. The Christian sacred becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus and this evening, even in the person of a new born child, lying in a bed of straw, surrounded by doting parents and devout shepherds.

Tonight we do not approach God in fear and trembling. Our God appears rather as someone we want to pick up and hug, And so too the spirit of Christmas is not a spirit of judgment and scolding for failing to measure up. Its a spirit of God with arms wide open, reaching out for warm embrace. It's not about imposing grandeur, but of the simple joys of home and hearth. It's a spirit of giving and receiving, of holding and being held. Its spirit of food and drink, song and dance. What we hold sacred tonight is not a God of power and might, but a God appearing weak enough, vulnerable enough, to draw out from us, the best in us.

And what about God? What does God hold sacred? Today we learn the answer to that question too-- that what *God* holds sacred is *us*, that we are the love of *his* life. A romantic Catholic mystic in the early nineteenth century put it this way: In the sin of Adam, humanity sought to live without God, but at Christmas we are reminded that God does not want to live without us.

What *we* hold sacred holds *us* sacred. That's the good news tonight. That's the gospel we preach. In response are we not then called, by all that is sacred, to treat one another equally sacred too? It's too easy to take ourselves and one another for granted. What's the work of a lifetime is to behold ourselves and each other in awe, to have the eyes of a newborn babe, wide open, curious, trusting, fixated by all the gifts that surround us, both presents and the givers of those presents and all the love those presents express.

After all, it is not just God who becomes incarnate this evening. Humanity too is born anew in that bed of straw. As God becomes flesh, so flesh becomes divine, tonight, in the birth of the Christ child. The Christmas presents we give and receive remind us and those dear to us, that we are all dear to one another. We can go back to competing with one another next week. But tonight let us savor that Christmas spirit of reverence and awe--for God and for each other. May we behold our God in the person of baby Jesus, and catch a glimpse of God beholding us as his baby child, holding us close.