

Christmas Eve – 2019

I think, therefore I am. So said Rene Descartes. His basic idea was to find a way to confirm that he exists (Cogito, ergo sum). Pete Townsend and Roger Daltrey asked a similar question: Who are you? That song became a rock-and-roll magnum opus for my generation. Man has an internal drive to figure out who he is. How many people, in the throes of an identity crisis, have looked in the mirror and painfully asked: “Who am I?” Most people want their sense of identity anchored to something real. Very few prefer lies to the truth, but there are some. We have a name, a pejorative name, for when this exercise becomes simply self-indulgent, an excessive contemplation of self at the expense of the genuine pursuit of meaning. We call it “navel gazing.” Who am I? Narcissists ask the question one way. The humble ask it another way.

The beginning of the movie “The Passion of the Christ” opens in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is wrestling with His appointed destiny at the Holy Cross. While being completely submissive, the Lord asks His Father that the chalice of His suffering be taken from Him. “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). The director of the movie inserts Satan into the scene, sowing seeds of doubt, confusion. He asks “Who is your father?” “Who are you?” Upon unleashing that verbal dagger, a snake slithers from underneath Satan’s cloak and ventures toward the Lord. Great mischief is done when we don’t understand who we are.

Carl Sagan believed that the more we probe the universe, the distant stars, the closer we will get to discovering who we are. Have you heard of the game “Huckle Buckle Beanbag?” It’s also called Hot Buttered Beans, but you and I know it as “You’re Getting Warmer.” Hide an object and help the seeker by telling him whether he’s getting closer (warmer) or further away (colder). Darwin devised a theory to tell man who he is (evolution). Many adopt this theory. Ultimately it leads away from the truth – what does God tell those who follow lies? You’re getting colder. In the case of evolution...? You’re freezing!

Angels streamed from heaven and announced a mystery, God Himself was present and was to be found in the unlikeliest of places: “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:11-12). The shepherds went with haste. The closer they came to the manger the warmer they got. The word of the angels echoed in their minds as their feet carried them to where God Himself lay in straw, in a trough for barnyard animals.

A mystery lay in that manger; a mystery that is bigger than our heart, bigger than our mind. What did they see, those shepherds? A baby. What lies hidden there, in that child? Let’s start with love. Have you known love? The glory of love in your heart has swept over you. Love is good, a delight that we feel, that we know, that elevates us, enriches us. The shepherds saw the reality that they feel for love itself had become incarnate – a mystery. Love’s author, love’s center, love’s purity, its beginning and its end – there it was; not only to be discovered, but to be known, to be seen, to be treasured, embraced. Located love, in all of its fullness, right in front of their eyes, without protection, without a prohibitive screen, without pretension. The shepherds were hot, burning up, as they knelt before God in Bethlehem’s stable.

The Creator lay there and also His will to give *lay there* – a mystery of extraordinary proportion. Eternity and life itself lay there to be seen, to be apprehended – a mystery that we cannot fully fathom. Who are you? You will never truly know who you are apart from that manger, that Child, that mystery. God and man in one person. Immanuel, God with us – that is the starting point for discovering who you are. Who are you? The liturgy holds the mirror up to you face and teaches you to say what you see. “I, a poor, miserable sinner.” Yes, that is the truth. Again, some prefer to base their lives upon lies, rather than the truth. Men grow weak apart from the truth, men grow cold, grow dull and numb and lame. I, a poor, miserable sinner. That is who you are, that is who I am; but the story, the revelation grows from there. The child, born of a Virgin, is the divine response to who you are. Christmas is the divine revelation of who God **wills you to be.**

Have you lied? Have you stolen? Have you robbed someone of their reputation by your gossip, your slander, your vindictive and unholy speech? You are a sinner – separated from God and mired in death. Have you been immodest, sexually impure, adulterous in heart, wallowing in this world’s pigpen of indulgence and rank self-gratification? You are a sinner – preferring darkness to light and hell to heaven. In your brokenness, in your poverty, in your death – God comes to meet you, to redeem you, to love you and save you. God Himself is committed to sinners; that is the mystery of His love. To His enemies, He gives Himself unreservedly. The Lord Christ is committed to you generously, permanently, completely. You will never be alone. Death shall not claim you. God has come – not to a generic world, not to a mere geographical region, not to a nameless, faceless race of peoples – God has come to you. He is your God as He lies in the hay. All of humanity is warm for God comes to us.

The mystery deepens as Jesus sets His face toward Jerusalem. The Lord of glory dies on a cross which the rulers of the world set up. Those who did not know who they were crucified God. They meant it for evil but God meant it for good. Love makes itself fully known as it gives itself up into death. Blood streams from every pore and the glory of God shakes the earth as Jesus dies. Christ crucified is a mystery that our hearts and minds cannot fully take in. God dies, destroys death and life is the product. Sin is vanquished as all sin is located in God and heaven is open for you. Love triumphs as love is defeated. This mystery comes to you. This mystery envelops you.

You are a mystery. Christ is in you; so says the Scripture. The dwelling of the exalted Christ, crucified and risen, in a poor miserable sinner; you are a mystery. Christmas does not keep a safe distance from you. God is made man to venture literally into your being. You are exalted and yet your home is to be a manger, your disposition is to be a servant’s disposition, your glory is to be found in a love that gladly takes the lowest place.

This night, this service is a mystery. God comes near. He nestles Himself in bread and wine, a sacrament, a mystery. As you approach this altar you are getting warmer with Christmas, warmer with the apex of love, warmer with Immanuel. This Divine Service is a Christmas event! This service is not a distant remembrance of a thing that happened and is long past. You are receiving the mystery – a contemporary revelation of God’s good will, His steadfast love, His manger, His cross and His glory.

In the movie, when the snake slithered up to the beleaguered Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus stood up, took a deep breath and crushed the head of the serpent. The Lord Christ, even in distress, knew who He was – the Seed of the Woman who had come to defeat all that which stand opposed to us – the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. You know who you are. You are a child of God, a child of Christmas, a saint, a believer, a product of Good Friday and Easter. You are a new creation. You are loved of God and ever shall you be. You have been washed in the blood of the Incarnate God – baptized into His death and resurrection. You are forgiven, you are nestled in Christ's wounds, you are heaven bound, you are the light of the world. All this is a mystery that flows from God being made man. When God looks at you, He knows who you are – you are in His Son. That is His design; That is His Christmas gift.