

THE NATIVITY of OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST 24 December 2018

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White, Rector of St Andrew's Parish, Kent, Connecticut

Isaiah 52.7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1.1-12; Luke 2.1-20

Nicholas, the bishop of the area around Myra, now in eastern Turkey, in the early 4th century, is the Saint Nicholas who eventually emerged in this country as Santa Claus. The original Nicholas cared deeply about the welfare of children and gave his money, anonymously whenever possible, to them and to the poor. One story tells us that when he found out that three young sisters were unable to marry because their father could not afford to pay their dowries, Nicholas dropped a bag of gold down the family's chimney –perhaps the basis for Santa's distinctive way of delivering packages

Such tales about Nicholas made him immensely popular in the Middle Ages (many parish churches were named for him), and enthusiasm for him lives on: even though we know very little about him, his reputation for generosity in part underlies our own annual season of gift-giving, even as his devotion to caring for children re-enforces our emphasis on the young at the time when we recall the Christ Child appearing among us in modest and needy circumstances.

Christmastide is a season when we all have and share stories about our children, children; and my friend Audrey remembers one Christmas when she and her barely younger brother were small and living in an apartment in the city.

Her brother had become desperate to replace his tricycle with a bicycle and he had been pleading urgently for one. Their father, however, insisted repeatedly that it was too dangerous for small boys to ride bicycles in the city and that he would need to wait until he was older, until they had moved out of town. The case seemed closed. Christmas arrived and even though no possibility of a bicycle arriving was likely, early on Christmas morning he and Audrey awakened one another and rushed to the living room to see if Santa Claus had indeed stopped by. As they rounded the corner, they found themselves staring at a bright, shiny new bicycle next to the tree and they halted abruptly in their tracks. For a moment they just looked, slack-jawed in astonishment; and then Audrey's brother whispered to her, 'Uh oh Is Dad going to be mad ...?'

We know so little about Saint Nicholas of Myra, and yet his reputation, however bolstered by later imaginations, has made a lasting impression on so many of us. It can move each of us to give, to indulge, to bless with kindnesses those who ask of us, those who have neither thought nor dared to ask. Did Santa Clause visit Audrey's childhood home ...? Well ... the original Saint Nicholas did –the spirit embodied in a long-deceased, otherwise obscure 4th century bishop, touching men and women centuries later, urging them to give, to bless children and not only children.

All of which comes somehow near the heart of the feast that we once again observe on this night, the Feast of the Incarnation. As we begin more and more deeply to realise how the examples

that we ourselves set –and the stories that can grow up around them—can touch and move others, many of whom we will never see or know, we can begin more and more to feel the power of the Incarnation.

God comes into our world in recognizable human flesh, and not in a palace because that is not where most of us live; and not noticed first by the important and the powerful, but rather by shepherds, the people whom everybody else despise, because we too have known or will know what it is to be despised. And the infant God-incarnate grows up to live insistent that the powerless poor, the inconvenient blind and lame, the off-putting sick and diseased, the unlikeable tax collectors, and those too fearful to want to be noticed –all of these are worthy of God's presence, God's love, God's care.

And he invites those around him, and through the stories that they have told about him he invites each of us, too, to 'Do as I do: Love, just love. Care. Bless'. And he remains with us, over and over again urging us to love, to care, and to bless. For, like the Saint Nicholas whom he once inspired, he is mostly known in those of us who seek to imitate him, who seek themselves to embody what it is to love, to care, to bless for Christ's sake.

And so on this Holy night, I wish you a Christmas of much love, much caring, and many blessings, as the Spirit that the infant in the stable in Bethlehem embodied moves through you and towards you. Amen.