**3 Advent 2024**

On Saturday, December 6th, St. Nicholas paid a visit to the children of Pottstown at Christ Church. I was St. Nicholas, of course, but the children and adults present suspended disbelief and entered into the magic of imagination. The new little book in my Fr. Christmas trilogy, Becoming Santa, was published last week by Amazon and is available for $10.01 for the Christmas season. In part, it is autobiographical and tells the story of how the spirit of St. Nicholas has shaped me as a person and a priest.

As I spoke to the children, I asked them what Christmas was all about. “Jesus”, one said. Yes. “Getting presents”, said another. Yes. “What else”, said I. “Giving gifts!”, exclaimed one precocious little girl. Yes, indeed! I reminded them that Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive. “Why is that,” I said. Another girl said, “Because it makes you feel happy when you give.” Bingo! Giving is a happy, joyful exercise. Getting something feels good, but giving something feels even better.

Indeed, in Jesus’s day if you received something, you were then expected to give something in return. This taught that receiving and giving were tied together, but giving was the most important part. St. Paul would later say to the Romans. ‘Outdo one another in showing honor.’ As Christians we learn how to give and give and give, knowing that we can’t out give God. This is at the heart of following in the way of Jesus, and is a cause for rejoicing moment by moment.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a Latin word that means “rejoice.” In today’s Epistle lesson, St. Paul says to the Philippians, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.’

Gaudete Sunday is a time to remember that the joy of the Lord is our strength, particularly in tough times. Even in suffering, we do not lose our joy. And with joy comes a peace that can’t be explained. John the Baptist, who we hear from again this morning, doesn’t seem like a very joyful, peaceful character. And yet his call is to live simply, justly, and givingly. (I made up that word, ‘givingly,’ but you know what I mean!) It is more blessed, happier, and joyful to give than to receive. And therein we find God’s peace.

I think about Mary the Virgin on 3 Advent. Jesus’s human mother, but also the Queen of Heaven and Theotokos, Greek for ‘the God-bearer.’ Mary is the most holy, blessed, joyful human who ever has lived or will ever live. We do not worship her, but we highly venerate her. She shows up in the Nicene Creed not just as Mary, but as the Virgin Mary. The Angel Gabriel called her divinely or happily favored, most fortunate to be called to bear the Messiah, Jesus, Emmanuel—God with us for the life of the world. Mary’s response was let it be done to me as you have said. She says ‘yes’ to God. That’s what the word amen means, ‘Yes, may it be so.’ Let it be.

John the Baptist reminds us that the coming of our Lord requires a certain self-emptying on our part. We must let go of our attachments, get closer to Christ, and empty ourselves of everything holding us back. As Pope Francis has said, “Whenever we encounter another person in love [by giving], we learn something new about God. We become closer to God, and therefore, we are happier.” Mary was willing to empty herself to be filled up with Jesus. In medieval art, Mary is often placed in the center of the Upper Room where the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples at the Pentecost. They’re all looking to her to model for them what is means to bear God in and through their lives.

Our Trinity community is a Spirit-filled community. We’re learning more and more how to listen to God through John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, to pour out ourselves in acts of compassion and justice. We’re small but mighty and as the word gets around we will grow.

This past Wednesday, I met officially for the first time with the children and teachers of our school. We chatted, took a tour of the church, rang the church bell, and I shared with them that although I am not Santa or St. Nicholas, I am one of his many human helpers across the world. They loved it. We talked about giving and receiving and, like the kids at Christ Church, Pottstown, our little Trinity school friends agreed that giving makes us feel happiness and joy. The little children are leading us through Advent to Christmas.

**May it be so.**