

First Mass of the Nativity

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

WELCOME! I'm grateful that you've come out this evening, that we're here together to acknowledge the meaning of the season, to connect with what's real and deep, to allow for something more in life.

Last June, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, came to Washington for an extended stay. He carved out of his hectic life some space to read, to reflect, to write, and to be still. This didn't sit well with some in the Church. One important and anxious church official complained: "He's supposed to be Archbishop of Canterbury! The Church of England is collapsing around his ears! And where is he? In America for two months! Writing a book about Dostoevsky!"¹ Indeed, what a frivolous, irresponsible man thinking about Dostoevsky and finding inspiration and renewal in him.

While perhaps the finest, most creative novelist ever and a serious Christian, Dostoevsky was not an entirely savory figure – a compulsive gambler, a serious debtor, a political prisoner, an anti-Semite. One of the Archbishop's secular fans speculated that if Williams were to present Dostoevsky to the governing body of the Church of England, "there would probably be some prim intakes of breath."²

Religion – be it Christianity or any other – often does stifle real thought and reflection and often relies upon conventional wisdom, unquestioned habits, shallow Shibboleths. Karl Marx was at least partially right: religion *can be* the opiate of the masses. But Marx didn't say anything original here. It's one of the central themes of the Bible. Many, if not most, of the Old Testament prophets – Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea – attacked their religious establishment for its oppression and injustice and hypocrisy and superficial morality.

Jesus is very much part of that tradition. Jesus gets on the case of religious people. He told the respectable religious folks, "The tax collectors and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you." (Mt 21:31) Jesus leveled his harshest criticism not at the irreligious, not at sinners, but at the respectable religious people, at people who use religion to see themselves as better than others, at people using religion to get leverage over others, and even over God.

Neat, clean, respectable, church-going Mrs. Turpin is the protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's short story 'Revelation.' She sits in a doctor's crowded waiting room and chats amiably with a stranger. She also sizes up the room, observing the numerous short-comings of everyone there and finding herself superior to those of other races, classes, looks, manners, means. After all, she and her husband have their own home and their own land on which they raise hogs.

¹ A.N. Wilson, 'Where Rowan Williams Meets Dostoevsky,' *Telegraph*, 25 September 2008.

² *Ibid.*

Across the waiting room, Mary Grace, a surly, unattractive, young woman, is reading a book – *Human Development*. She becomes increasingly annoyed as she listens to Mrs. Turpin’s self-satisfied commentary. Mrs. Turpin declares with feeling, “If it’s one thing I am, it’s grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, “Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!”” She has just cried aloud again, “Jesus, thank you,” when *Human Development* whacks her on the head. Immediately after whipping her book at Mrs. Turpin, Mary Grace charges across the room and sinks her fingers into the soft flesh of Mrs. Turpin’s neck. Magazines fly about, a table falls over, and several bodies converge upon the two women and pull the young woman off Mrs. Turpin.

While momentarily paralyzed, Mrs. Turpin recovers. Although she has an angry, red swelling above her eye, a painful and growing egg, Mrs. Turpin instead focuses her attention on the insult and demands an apology. She looks down on the young woman, lying restrained on the floor, “What you got to say to me?” Mary Grace gazes at her and whispers, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.”

Remarkably, Mrs. Turpin takes these words seriously. All day she reflects upon them and upon this unpleasant, mortifying experience. She considers it a divine revelation, but it’s hurtful, and she’s confused. That evening at home, while outside with her pigs, she furiously shouts at God, “How am I hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?” It’s confusing; it’s paradoxical; and, it’s the heart of the gospel: I’m not what I should be, and God loves me completely, infinitely. In a sense, we are all warhogs from hell and also cherished by God, who delights in us.

As Mrs. Turpin rages at God, the sun sets, and she sees a vision of a purple streak through the crimson sky:

[the purple] a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of [blacks] in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people she recognized at once as those who, like herself and [her husband], had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. ... They were marching behind the others... In a moment the vision faded... In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

Mary Grace, the bitter young woman, seems a long way from meek and mild Mary, mother of Jesus. But Mary Grace by conking Mrs. Turpin on the head with her book and insulting her conveys God’s grace. It renews and transforms Mrs. Turpin. She learns. She grows. In three ways, her story echoes this evening’s gospel and the hope of Christmas.

First, it’s about reversal. Unlike Mark and John, Luke doesn’t begin his gospel at the start of Jesus’ ministry. In Luke, the Word of God enters the world without words, only meek cries. Luke shows us a newborn baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, just as any baby would be. God comes to us not with great fanfare, not in a display of power and might, not demanding our allegiance and supplication, but rather he comes in the joy of new life, a delicate, budding life which requires our help and nurture, our participation and involvement. He comes as an infant: tiny, weak, vulnerable, helpless, ordinary, traumatized, unnoticed by the world. His coming challenges our notions of God as distant and separated, domineering and controlling. His coming upends our expectations.

In ancient Israel, shepherds were unwelcome, disreputable people, widely considered irreligious, coarse, sinners, beyond the pale. But in a starry field, God's glory shines upon them, and angels declare news of great joy. In Mrs. Turpin's world, the disreputable are white trash, blacks, and freaks and lunatics. Yet, God favors them. They're leading the march to heaven. One of the strongest themes in the Bible is God's choice of the unlikely and the overlooked. Abraham, Jacob, David, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul, Jesus – most of the biblical heroes were the least likely. God's always surprising us and blowing up the conventional way we look at things.

Second, it's about reconciliation. As Mrs. Turpin raged at God, she sputtered, "Why me? ... It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church." After all she'd done for God, why did he knock her in the head – embarrass her, terrify her, hurt her? She roared at God, "Who do you think you are?" Then God gives her the revelation of the hordes rumbling toward heaven. Mrs. Turpin had her revelation as she wrestled with God, pouring out her heart, enduring the pain, and opening herself to reconciliation and renewal, to a new life, to a fuller life.

Christmas is a time of big emotions, both good cheer, warmth, happiness, and also feelings of sadness, pain, loneliness, abandonment, feelings of not being so special. Christmas usually comes with tension and anxiety, guilt of letting down and hurt of being let down, and sometimes fighting and falling out. Most of the time, we live on the surface and avoid the pain of looking too closely at our flaws, wounds, and silliness, at the awful way we hurt and damage one another. But Christmas is often a time when we might risk a little more and face big issues, our conflict with one another, with ourselves, with God. Christmas offers the possibility for healing and growth, for a fuller life, for renewal, for a new beginning. That's what the baby in the manger means to us.

Third, it's about seeing differently. God turned Mrs Turpin's world upside down. It was a miracle. She saw God's favor upon all people, that God loved those she considered the least as much as he loved her. She could never again see other people the same way – no more us and them, no more looking down her nose. For her, the world was transformed. Even the crickets sounded like the heavenly chorus singing hallelujah. God's presence is over all, with all, in all, for all.

Cardinal Hume said, "It is a child's gift to be direct and not be surprised by truths that lie beyond their grasp."³ When Mary looked at her son in the manger, at first she must have only seen her child, but Mary pondered all these things in her heart. Gradually she came to see more, much more. She allowed for truths beyond her grasp. Mrs. Turpin allowed for truths beyond her grasp.

What do we see in the manger? Only the things we can grasp? It's just as logical to see only a baby. But if we choose hope, if we allow for more, that this child was somehow God become man, then maybe we might also be able to see God's love for one another and even for ourselves, we might be able to see God in one another and even in ourselves. Then our angels will sing, "Glory to God in the highest." It can be a song as common as crickets in summertime.

I wish you a Merry Christmas.

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

³ Basil Hume, *The Mystery of the Incarnation*, Darton, Longman, & Todd (1999), p. 13.