

Don't think about Christmas

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

A Collect for Christmas Eve, Book of Common Prayer, p. 212

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST: CHRISTMAS DAY

Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Titus 3:4-7, Luke 2:1-20

December 25, 2016

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

It will surprise no one who knows me to hear that I am subscribed to a poetry blog (called Panhala – “fresh water” in

Hindi, it's run by a friend of friends).

Typically the poetry is at a pretty high level... and yesterday I received something called "Written in 1513" by "Fra Giovanni." While some of you may know it, I hadn't heard of it before. It's been popular at times.

It is written to a friend of his by an actual "renaissance man," Fra Giovanni Giocondo. Fra Giovanni was a noted architect as well as a priest and had a range of other talents as well.

I settled on it as what I want to offer you today because it focuses on engaging life and truly entering into what life is offering us. That is our reciprocal response to God's act on Christmas.

Perhaps as a legacy from the enlightenment or as a defense, we tend to *think* about things or talk about them – but our engagement can be nothing beyond a mind game, a mental exercise that doesn't amount to much. It staggers me to try to calculate the number of drunken "I don't think Mary was really a virgin" conversations at Christmas dinner tables today. Pointless.

So we can say we "believe in" Jesus as son of God or get lost in conversations about any number of aspects of the Christmas narrative – the elements of the story – but the question remains: how are you (or we as a community) going to live as an expression of what God did and does in coming among us in flesh and blood? What change or growth in our true selves will result in what actions? How will we participate more fully, more wholly in all of

life and the actual world around us because of Christmas?

So here is this poem:

A Letter to the Most Illustrious the Contessina Allagia degli Aldobrandeschi, Written Christmas Eve Anno Domini 1513

~ Fra Giovanni Giocondo ~

I salute you. I am your friend, and my love for you goes deep.
There is nothing I can give you which you have not.
But there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it,
 you can take.

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today.
Take heaven!

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden
 in this present little instant.

Take peace!

The gloom of the world is but a shadow.

Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy.

There is radiance and glory in darkness, could we but see.

And to see, we have only to look.

I beseech you to look!

Life is so generous a giver.

But we, judging its gifts by their surface,

 cast them away as ugly or heavy or hard.

Remove the surface, and you will find beneath it a living splendor,

 woven of love by wisdom, with power.

Welcome it, grasp it, and you touch the angel's hand

 that brings it to you.

Everything we call a trial, a sorrow or a duty, believe me,
that angel's hand is there.
The gift is there and the wonder of an overshadowing presence.
Your joys, too, be not content with them as joys.
They, too, conceal even more divine gifts.

Life is so full of meaning and purpose, so full of beauty
beneath its surface,
that you will find earth but cloaks your heaven.
Courage then to claim it; that is all!
But courage you have, and the knowledge
that we are pilgrims together,
wending through unknown country, to home.

And so, at this time, I greet you,
not quite as the world sends greetings,
but with profound esteem and with the prayer
that for you, now and forever,
the day breaks and shadows flee away.