

St Marks, Niagara on the Lake
Christmas Eve, year 'A'
24 December 2022
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

For whatever reason, it isn't a beloved Christmas carol that's been going through my head these past few days. No "O Holy Nights"s or "The First Nowell"s or "Joy to the World"s. Funnily enough, the song I can't stop hearing is that well-known spiritual "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." And I think I know the reason why.

It's because, given the chaotic state of the world, we can't help but wonder if God is asleep at the wheel. And who can blame us, given the terrible disconnect between the sentiments of the Christmas season and the realities of contemporary life? The angels sing of peace and goodwill over all the earth, yet we know that there isn't any peace and very little goodwill. Politicians manoeuvre around systems and manipulate people; violence breaks out with increasingly random and destructive menace; everyone is giving into pettiness and squabbling. I suspect that our fear that God isn't in control and our discomfort with the profound disconnects between sentiment and reality are what drive us to focus at this time of year on images of innocence—especially the innocence of children in general, and of one child in particular.

It need hardly be said that so much of the traditional imagery of Christmas focuses on lost innocence: the virgin snow and the virgin mother; the children with their well-scrubbed faces and their wide-eyed excitement; the sentimental songs which speak of the most wonderful time of the year. All of these nostalgic images of purity and innocence have one thing in common, and that's a deep yearning for the way the world used to be before it all became so complicated, so dangerous, so ugly, so unfair, so threatened by division and divided by fear.

Which does bring to mind these lines from a familiar carol:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled
two thousand years of wrong.
And man at war with man hears not
the tidings which they bring;
O hush your noise, all ye of strife,
and hear the angels sing!

So painfully true is this, so brutally stark, that it seems as if our only refuge can be the burnished happiness of an imagined golden age of innocence. The reason why we make Christmas an affair of nostalgia, or an occasion for indulgence—and preferably both—is because we are desperate to preserve our childish notion of a genie-like God whose coming to earth means that we will be on easy street. In this way, we are not

unlike guileless children who, despite all of the evidence to the contrary, persist in their belief in Santa.

However, the incarnate God is no genie. The nativity story exposes the loose ends of our concept of God, whom we have cozily tried to cradle in our hands, foolishly thinking we have got hold of him in a neat and nostalgic parcel of belief. But we haven't got hold of him. Rather, it's he who's got hold of us. He's got us in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands. But notice that they are neither the hands of the magician with their impressive yet empty legerdemain, nor the hands of sheer, brute force which can bend and twist anything to their will. We assume that someone who has the whole world in his hands has it in a vice-like grip which would just as soon crush as it would comfort. Except the hands that have us are the hands of a baby.

Most of you have had a baby grasp your finger. So you know that a tiny child has a surprisingly strong grip, a grip almost of iron. Think for a minute then about the grip of the young babe lying in a manger. This Christ-child has your finger in his grasp, and he will never let you go. And if he's also got the whole world in the palm of his hand, then the world is ultimately secure despite the foolish and petty aggressions of humanity. You see, even though the incarnate God we celebrate in story and song this night comes to us a weak baby, we are told that the weakness of God is greater than human strength. What's more, if he came in innocence, it was the clear-eyed innocence that sees things for what they are, that sees you and me for who we are, the innocence which believes all things are possible, the innocence which disarms through the power of selfless love.

This isn't the innocence which must be protected and sheltered from the harsh, cold realities of the world, untouched by pain or conflict or sorrow. Rather, it's the innocence of what scripture calls "the pure of heart," a kind of unsullied moral insight which is neither beholden to nor bedazzled by the frantic whirl of this present age. It's the innocence which saw even within those who betrayed and slew him, their inner child longing for love, and forgiveness, and redemption—the child who was made in the image of God and could therefore be restored.

So it follows that it's the innocence which sees beyond the artifice of our own frail egos to the empty, hungry places within that yearn to be filled, not with chocolate and cognac, but with the innocent, childlike—and therefore Divine—peace which passes all understanding. Only his heart can forgive you. Only his grasp can lift you up. Only his innocence can save you.