

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 24, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

## About Christmas

Think how often we try to shield ourselves and our children and our children's children from the excesses of the cultural and materialistic and market-driven yearend holiday, the preparations for which actually began around Halloween.

We want all folks to understand that for us Christmas is about the birth of Jesus and God's Love. It has nothing to do with Rudolph, Frosty and a Santa Clause who brings gifts in direct correlation to a child's compliant behavior. And we fail miserably at this task.

A man by the name of Donald Heinz has written that, "Christians have always lamented and resisted the cultural captivity of Christmas. From the very beginning, Christians have tried to separate themselves from year-end festivities, but its been a failure."

Even before the Romans, the winter solstice was an occasion of thanksgiving and celebration. The darkness and the cold of the retreating sun inspired terror and when the sun started its slow return, ancient peoples marked the event with feasting and fertility celebrations and some of their symbols are still with us: boughs of evergreen, holly, ivy, and wreaths.

Later the Romans marked year's end with Saturnalia, a wild, week-long party. Christians decided to offer an alternative and began to celebrate the incarnation with Christ's mass. Their hope was that, in time, Christ's Mass would replace Saturnalia. That effort failed—says Donald Heinz—as has every church's attempt to banish the secular festival.

No one was as hard on Christmas as the Puritans. They argued that December 25th was not biblical, but heathen and that Jesus would have disapproved of his birthday celebrations and that Christmas was just a excuse for gross behavior, social upheaval and drunkenness all aided, no doubt, by the break in agricultural life between seasons. The Puritans ordered shops to stay open on December 25th and insisted that work go on as usual and banned holiday cakes and candles—no fruitcakes allowed, (I could live with that!) They also managed to have Christmas declared illegal by the Massachusetts legislature from 1659 to 1681. The U. S. Congress even remained in session on Christmas Day from 1789 to 1851.

The Puritans did a lot of good things but banning Christmas because of eating, drinking, celebrating and customs like kissing under the mistletoe was not one of their better ideas.

And all this leads me to say that "incarnation" means that this world is God's creation, that God loved it, loves it and so much so that God came here to be with us. The story of the man/God's birth—Jesus' birth—could not be more worldly. A pregnant, unwed teenager, a perplexed fiancé, an arduous journey, an inn already filled with guests, a barn or stable full of animals...labor, pain, blood, birth and shepherds. It could not be more human or more earthly...and that is the point.

Incarnation means that God is with us in this world: the sacred in the secular, the holy in the profane. Just look at that little oyster shell nativity scene. Chris no longer goes to the beach to look for shells, figures. She goes to the holy land called The Sands, or Hunting Island or Edisto Beach to look for the holy family.

It is this world that God entered on that first Christmas and enters again and again and again.

Amen and Merry Christmas.

