

Christmas 2008
Sermon, Bishop Paul Marshall
Cathedral Church of the Nativity

Merry Christmas to each of you. Some years it is easier to say that than others. This year we are in an anxious time. We are deeply aware of the instability the economy in general. Beyond that, everyone now knows the words “Ponzi scheme,” a knowledge that brings another level of anxiety and even mistrust to some minds. Each of us in this room knows somebody who has lost a job, some of us are that person, and many of us who have been patiently growing retirement funds over the years know we are going to have to work a good deal longer than we anticipated, and that brings a sense of weariness, even betrayal.

What does faith say in times like this? Oddly enough, we say that Christians and Christianity are at their very best when they move heroically and confidently through difficult times. We say that this feast called Christmas celebrates the generosity of God, and entering that generosity is the key to keeping our spirits up when times are down.

Think about it. Why did Christianity grow so fast in its early years? It wasn't because the emperor Constantine semi-converted in the year 313—Christian numerical growth had already happened and he merely bowed to that fact. It wasn't because Christians all had one set of clear doctrines—they were centuries away from agreeing about to talk about God [Chalcedon], and centuries away from deciding what books were in their scriptures. Yet in the midst of its religious imprecision, the Church grew. How come?

The top social historians of our day agree that Christianity grew so fast mostly because Christians were known for their unusual compassion for those around them, especially toward those who were not members of their faith. From the Book of Acts on, they raised money on one continent to aid those on another continent, never for a moment presuming to think that mean little thought, that charity begins at home. They knew that charity does not begin at home. It begins with helping the people you don't know and might not care for, just as the Good Samaritan did, just as Jesus did by leaving his heavenly home for our sake.

The first Christians let the gospel train them, as St. Paul says in our epistle tonight, to be a people who were zealous for good deeds. That's a religious way of saying that they were really and truly into serving the world, the whole world. They knew that God's taking flesh in Jesus for the sake of the whole world wasn't an event in the past. It was the pattern for their own lives every day. What did that look like?

In about the year 250 a plague struck Alexandria, Egypt, and actually killed more

than half of the population. People with resources got as far away from town as they could—except the Christians. In a time of panic and danger, they stayed in town and cared for the sick and dying, and some of them paid for that generosity with their lives. People joined the church.

Throughout the empire, Christians were known to patrol the garbage dumps, but they weren't looking for antiques. Those dumps were where people placed infants they didn't want, and the church got a reputation for saving lives that others had put in the trash. People joined the church.

Again, in the Alexandrian community, those who lived on the church's dole would often go entirely without food one day a week so that they, too, would have something to give others. People joined the church. That is why I decided to give the children money instead of chocolate—so they would be able to have the corporate experience of giving to those in need out of what they have been given. It is a way to know the heart of the incarnation.

Let's leave ancient history. I have seen many, many lives change because of participation in our New Hope project. From the little girl who ran a yard sale of toys she was done with to the retired lady who went back to work so she could make a major contribution, I have shed tears to see love expressed so unselfishly. A fourth-grader recently handed this [a teddy bear] to a friend of mine asking that it go to a child in Sudan.

And let's come right to your doorstep. I often comment on Nativity's practice of giving away its Christmas and Easter offerings to care for those in need. Those are the two largest offerings of the year. Many churches count on those offerings to survive, but your vestry puts mission concerns before survival concerns. At this time in history, when financial concerns are acute even for churches, your continuing to send money away from home is a bold statement that you accept Christianity's mission of being to people what Jesus was when he walked this planet.

In doing so you follow the rich tradition that gave Christianity its growing potential. People in an age of anxiety were attracted to a religion whose adherents could dare not to *follow* the culture, but to *transform* it.

The epistle also says that in being zealous for good works we are training ourselves to renounce some things that stunt our souls. When times are difficult, we can overdo our natural inclination to self-protection. What happens then, as Ebenezer Scrooge reminds us, is that we shrivel inside. But when we reach out to others in the midst of our own worrying, we change, we are liberated for the subtle joy of knowing ourselves to be united with Christ. Science tells us we are hard-wired for that selfless giving we call altruism; Jesus shows us how to achieve it, and in achieving it, have life in abundance.

So the opportunity each of us has when anxiety enters our lives on any level is to grow our souls by doing what Jesus did, caring harder for those around us. The opportunity that we have corporately is the same, with the added possibility that what happened in the ancient world will happen again: people around us can be attracted to a community that continuously gives as Jesus gave, sacrificially and out of love.

I think the best Christmas gift we could give ourselves is to double the amount we were going to put in the plate tonight. It won't go to me, it won't go to the parish; it won't even necessarily go to Christians. It *will* tell some people that the Cathedral Church of the Nativity loves them, that God loves them. And that may be the biggest thrill, the major moment of liberation from anxiety and spiritual uplift for us on this holy night. After all, it worked for three wise men.