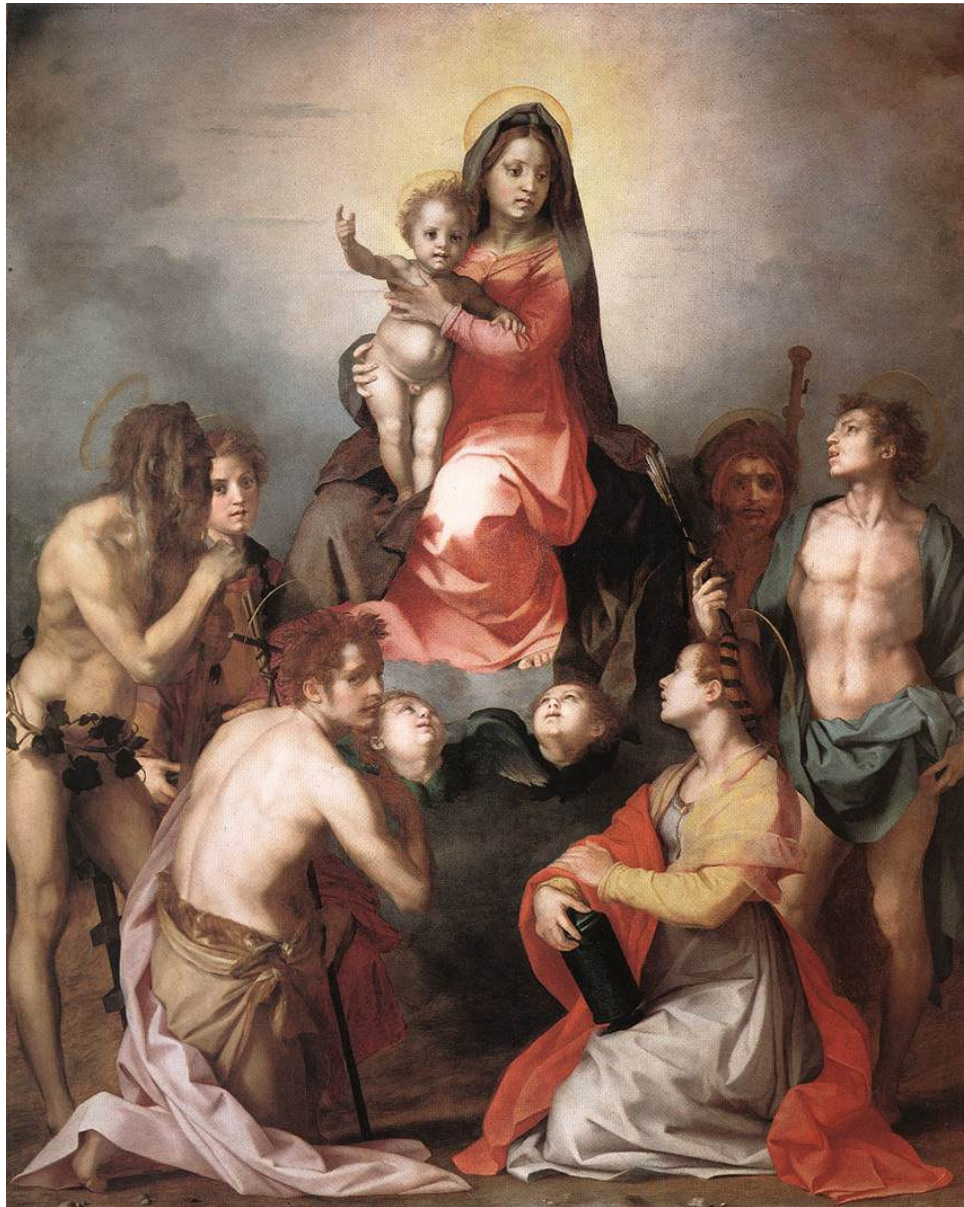


CHRISTMAS AND SADNESS :

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Gerald Keucher
in the church of St Mary, Staten Island, New York,
at the Solemn High Mass of the Nativity,
on Christmas Morning, 25th December, 2003.

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Isaiah lii7-10; Hebrews i1-12; John i1-14



**In the Name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost:
AMEN.**



ONE OF MY FAVORITE CHRISTMAS CAROLS is the Sussex Carol. It begins, “On Christmas night all Christians sing to hear the news the angels bring.” In the next stanza it poses a question that often catches people’s attention. In very simple old language it asks:

*Then why should men on earth be so sad,
since our Redeemer made us glad?*

Why *are* we so sad? Why *do* we make ourselves and one another so unhappy? If sometimes we dread the holidays, I think it’s not because of the frazzle of preparations and shopping and cooking; I think it’s often because we perceive how the deep sadness of our lives is out of sync with the joy we think we’re supposed to feel at Christmastime.

We are often sad. Friendships and marriages break up; loved ones die; we are lonely; we may be frustrated in our jobs. Maybe there are things about ourselves we’ve never been able to accept, or maybe there was something in our lives we thought we really wanted, and so we become a Difficult Person and find ways to make ourselves and others miserable with the fruit of our anger and self-loathing.

Yes, we’re often sad. And we’re sometimes anxious or angry or depressed or frustrated or resentful or suspicious. And it’s sad to see someone’s life eaten away by all this. “Then why should men on earth be so sad, since our Redeemer made us glad?”

Here’s one way to understand what’s going on. We human beings are structured by desire. We have the same instinctual urges other animals do; we need food, sleep, and shelter. But beyond those instinctual needs, we human beings *desire*. We *long*, we *yearn*, we *aspire*, we *hanker*.

When we come squalling out of the womb, sure we may need to be fed, and we’ll need changing soon after that, but already we are structured by desire. We long for approval. We hanker for attention. We aspire to recognition. We yearn to be loved.

The desire that propels us throughout our lives is the desire to be loved. God put that desire at the foundation of every human soul, so that we would aim the arrow of our desire directly at God’s heart of love, and we would find that God loves each of us more than words can express.

That’s how God intended it, and that way lie fulfillment and joy and gladness.

But no later than the moment we’re yanked out of the womb and whacked for our own good to get us breathing, our desire is distorted by the twisted human cultures into which all people have been born. All societies are fatally infected by the original distortion of desire. The Bible speaks of it as that matter of the serpent and the apple, followed almost immediately by the first murder of one brother by the other. Cain went on to found the first city, and human cultures and societies have never been right. How could they be right, when there’s always rivalry and murder at the start?

So why should men on earth be so sad? Of course we’re sad. We are propelled by desire, but our arrows are aimed at targets that can’t possibly bring us satisfaction.

Money can’t buy you love, as the Beatles taught us.

Physical beauty becomes much more difficult and expensive to maintain with every passing year.

Fifteen minutes of fame is the most you can get, as Andy Warhol knew, and the formerly-famous and the never-quite-famous eat their hearts out on “Celebrity Fear Factor.” Their fear is prompted not the loathsome activities I hear they’re supposed to engage in; the fear that drives them is the fear of no longer being in the public eye.

Spouses sometimes cheat, and, when they mostly don’t, one will almost certainly betray the other by dying first.

Children can disappoint you; the healthy ones actually dare to live their own lives instead of allowing you to live through them.

Friends, colleagues and acquaintances can be fickle, and very often they incomprehensibly think that *they* are the center of the universe, ignoring the fact that’s quite obvious to you that *you* are that center.

In short, “the arm of flesh will fail you,” as the hymn says, but we lean on one broken reed after another. There’s virtually nothing in our culture that gives us a clue as to where our desire really wants to be aimed, so we allow ourselves to think that a little more money, or a promotion, or the right brand of hair coloring or deodorant or the right car will give us that deep fulfillment for which we were created to yearn. Of course all these fail us, and of course we’re sad.

But God refuses to abandon us to our sadness. Beginning with Abraham, God called a people whose desire could be trained on the proper target. Through the prophets and sages and the people’s right steps and missteps the message becomes clearer.

Finally, in the sixth month the angel Gabriel visits a young woman with the amazing offer that she should be the Mother of God. In spite of the danger and scandal her pregnancy would cause, and despite the squalor and pain and mess of giving birth in a stable, the girl said “yes,” giving us an example of desire aimed in the direction God intended and making Christmas possible.

In JESUS God has revealed to all of us where all our longings and desires can find satisfaction. In JESUS God has given us the example of a life undistorted by competitiveness and manipulation. And in JESUS’ death and resurrection God has opened the way out of the thicket where we long ago lost our way.

Through God’s Word to us in Holy Scripture, through the Sacraments of the Church and through participation in the Christian community God gives us the means and the grace to disentangle ourselves from the briars of misdirected desire. God reveals to us the One we were created to desire and helps us aim our lives toward Him.

The Sussex Carol ends, “All out of darkness we have light, which made the angels sing this night.” There is still great darkness around and within us. But the light of God’s love has broken into our darkness, and the darkness can never overcome it.

Because of Easter and Christmas God can re-form us so we can live with the open-minded, open-hearted, generous patience that characterizes those who have looked for the love they long for in the only place it can be found. Setting our desire toward God does

not spare us from difficulties. The scorn and reproach heaped on JESUS may fall on us, and the sword that pierced His mother's heart may touch our own. But we can bear up under all that because we'll be receiving the love we were created to want.

May the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you and scatter the darkness from before your path. Merry Christmas.

***In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost:***

AMEN.



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NOTE FROM THE PARISH PRIEST:

We were very grateful to have Fr Jerry with us on Christmas morning.

You can hear the Sussex Carol (but prepare to endure a grisly computer-generated soundtrack) at: <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/x/oxnallcs.htm>

Our cover shows Andrea del Sarto's lovely *Madonna in Glory and Saints* (about 1528), now in Pitti Palace. Old Adam in his fig leaves, Lawrence with his fatal griddle, John the Baptist with his camel-skin, Mary Magdalen with her jar of ointment, a figure that baffles me with a bagpipe (a bagpipe?), and Sebastian with an arrow, all contemplate the source of their hope and joy.

RJCM✠