

THE IRRESISTIBLE:

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Gerald Keucher
in the parish church of St Mary, Staten Island, New York,
at the Midnight Mass for the Nativity of Our Lord JESUS Christ,
commonly called Christmas, on the night of 24th December, 2005.

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

AMEN.



I WANT TO WELCOME YOU here tonight. I'm very grateful to the Rector for the honour of being allowed to preach on Christmas Eve. This is a beautiful service in a beautiful parish, and I'm very happy to be part of it.

There are two realities that a priest always comes smack up against on Christmas and Easter at sermon-time. The first is that I need to talk about a message that is so familiar that it is difficult not to repeat merely pious platitudes. The second reality is that on Christmas and Easter a priest is, I hope, speaking to a fair number of people who hear only Christmas and Easter sermons. The two realities are related, because it may very well be that the pious platitudes preachers are always in danger of repeating on these occasions are part of what keeps some of you from coming back at other times.

I've now set myself a difficult task, because I've more or less promised that you'll hear something compelling tonight. I pray that's so.

But it should be easy, because we're here tonight to contemplate the irresistible. William Butler Yeats wrote, "Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not persuade, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible."

Some of you may feel you're here under false pretences. You may think that being a Christian means accepting some historical and intellectual propositions and a certain philosophy, or even ideology. That's not how I see it. Or there may be doctrines of the Church you're not entirely sure you accept. All that is all right.

Tonight we're talking about the irresistible. "Only that which does not teach, which does not persuade, which does not explain, is irresistible." Teaching, persuasion, and explanations are part of Christian life. But that's not where we really begin. Christian life begins with our longing for the Irresistible.

Christianity is not a series of doctrines; it is a series of events. JESUS did not enter the world with a list of things we must all believe. He was born as a baby, and the meaning of His birth was not really explained. The angels simply told the shepherds that the baby was born. After the angels left, it was the shepherds who said, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing." The angels' message was irresistible precisely because it did not teach, it did not persuade, it did not condescend, it did not explain. The heavens burst open with joy, and the shepherds wanted to be swept into it.

No, there were no explanations that night — only events. There were all those people with the sense that something was happening, but no one understood exactly what. Shepherds come in with a story of angels; Joseph is there, no doubt still wondering just whose baby it is, and what in the world he's doing there because he knows it isn't his. Even Mary doesn't know what it all means. We saw her wondering what the angel's greeting might mean when he told

her she was going to get pregnant, and tonight she's in the middle of what's happening, but she's just taking it all in, pondering what it all means.

Nobody exactly understood, but there was something irresistible. So they stayed.

So if you're sitting here, doubting the reality of what we're talking about and not at all convinced, but still staying here, you're doing just what the people in the Bible did.

But what *does* it mean? If the exact meaning isn't given to us, why did it happen at all? What is that encounter with the Irresistible — the bedrock Christian experience?

Tom Long wrote of a priest who was called to a parish and was trying to get around to visit the people. One family on the list hadn't been around for about two years, and the priest was told that she shouldn't waste her time on them, because they weren't going to come back.

She went to see them anyway. Only the wife was home; she poured coffee, and they sat in the kitchen and chatted. They talked about this; they talked about that. Then they talked about *it*. Two and a half years earlier the woman was home with her one young son. She was vacuuming and had not checked on him in a while, so she turned off the vacuum, went into the den, and did not find him. She followed his trail, across the den, through the patio door, across the patio, to the swimming pool, where she found him. "At the funeral our friends at the church were very kind, she said, "They told us it was God's will."

The priest put her cup down. Should she touch it or not? She touched it. "Your friends meant well, but they were wrong."

"What do you mean," the woman asked.

"I mean that God does not will the death of children."

The woman got red, and her jaw set. "Then who do you blame? I guess you blame *me*."

"No, I don't blame you. I don't blame God either."

"Then how do you explain it?" the woman said, getting angry.

"I don't know. I can't explain it. I don't understand why things like that happen. I only know that God's heart broke when yours did."

The woman couldn't talk any more, and the priest thought she had blown the situation, but a few days later the woman called and said, "Could you come to talk to my husband and me? We assumed God was angry at us; maybe it's the other way around."

You see, JESUS didn't come to a world that was doing just fine. He didn't come to people whose lives were all in order. He came to a messy, unjust world. He came to people who have great sadness and disappointments in their lives. He comes to address that very thing, the thing we really can't bear to look at or talk about because it is so painful.

Most of us, whether or not we are faithful churchgoers, react to our sadness like the woman whose baby died. We think pain and evil must be someone's fault, so we blame others, or ourselves, or God.

JESUS' actions have a different message, a message that is not primarily intellectual, and a message we don't understand right away. JESUS never gives anything close to an explanation of suffering or evil. He does something quite different — something strangely irresistible. From the cold discomfort of the first Christmas to His painful death on the cross, JESUS knew all the same kinds of sadness that we know. He did not escape it, and even when He prayed, the cup of suffering was not taken from Him.

Christmas is when God began to share our sadness so completely that He can speak to us as One Who has been there, as One Who is always here with us.

We *want* to be with someone who understands exactly what we're going through.

We *want* to be with someone who delights in being with us — someone who makes us suspect that our existence might have a role to play in the drama of the whole Creation.

We *want* to be with someone whose heart breaks at our sorrows and who doesn't condescend.

That's what we long for, and when we glimpse it, there's something irresistible in it, like a star rising in a dark sky that we're somehow drawn to follow.

All the meaning comes after that. When we talk with one another about that experience of being drawn to the Irresistible, what language do we find ourselves using? Oh, we're shy about talking of the experience openly; we use oblique language about how much we love this parish, or how important the Church is to us, or how much we value this fellowship.

The experience of desiring the Irresistible is somehow so inarticulate. And yet it finds expression in various ways that are completely satisfying. If we bring to it our aching longing for the Irresistible, we'll read the Bible differently. We'll find that it tells the stories of others who have longed for the Irresistible, and we'll keep going back to those stories, because now recognize ourselves in them.

The words of the Creed and the liturgy are another way of articulating that longing and that inchoate apprehension of the Irresistible. *Light from Light...thou only art holy...Come to me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden...God so loved the world...Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven...* Once we recognize that longing in ourselves, we'll participate in the Liturgy differently.

Teaching and explanations can prepare us to seek the Lord where He wills to be found. And doctrine and the Tradition give meaning to our experience the way an angel food cake pan gives form to batter that wouldn't do very well on its own.

But tonight there's only the Irresistible God, and now He's in the truly irresistible human form — a baby. Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not persuade, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible. And the Irresistible is lying in the manger.

Tonight the Irresistible that we long for has come to sweep us up into the love He brings to the deepest sadness of our lives. Now observation and experience in this fallen world indicate that we have the ability to resist the Irresistible. But, while you might be *able* to resist the Irresistible, why would you *want* to? O come, let us adore Him!



***To God the Son,
therefore,
with the Father
and the Holy Ghost
ever One,
be thanks and praise now,
and in the ages of ages.
Amen!***



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Adoration of the Shepherds (1476-79),
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence