

**CHRISTMAS EVE•MIDNIGHT MASS 2009
SERMON-CHRIST CHURCH PARISH
FATHER JOHN ALTBERG**

ISAIAH 9, 2-7 TITUS 2.11 JOHN 1, 1-19



MIDNIGHT MASS, AS TONIGHT IS ALMOST UNIVERSALLY IDENTIFIED IS ALSO, IF LESS WELL KNOWN, THE SHEPHERDS' MASS...IT IS BECAUSE SHEPHERDS NEAR BETHLEHEM, STARTLED, BY THE BRIGHT LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS, WERE DRAWN TO THE MANGER BY THE ANGELS AND APPOINTED INSTANT AGENTS TO GO TELL OTHERS...

Tonight's Epistle contains a word I always find curious...it identifies followers of Jesus as "**a peculiar people**" committed to doing the right thing. Peculiar...? Indeed some have gone to recent extremes to single Christians out as such! Don't despair...it's true...for the original Greek word *periousian* means literally belonging to the flock...we are the people to whom the shepherds delivered the message...the Good News of the arrival of the Savior!

During Advent we asked God to help us put away darkness and only do things that we want to be seen in the light...things for which we wanted to be known

The shepherds announce that Light comes now into the world with the birth of Jesus...that Light profoundly improves your life if you do not shut it out.

The OT Prophecy of Isaiah tells us...*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great Light; those who walked deep darkness, on them Light has shined.* The Last Gospel that concludes the Mass emphasizes the coming of light into the darkness and tells of Jesus as the true *Light*, through him we might now recognize God.

We take understandable discomfort at enforced secularization of the *Light*... attempting to snuff out Christmas in this era of political 'correctitudes'. Before you get too exercised over the matter, a little historical perspective is in order...scholars still don't know the precise time of the year Jesus was born...3c speculation was April/May, but the early Church, probably late in the fourth century, seized the 25th of December, three days after the winter solstice from a Roman pagan tradition called the *Feast of Lights* owing to the fact that this time of the year the

darkening hours of the days give way to the lengthening of daylight and one begins rather naturally to feel better about more light as opposed to more darkness...in case you want to wow your friends at dinner, tomorrow is 32 seconds longer than last Friday...

Bottom line...an annoying enforced NAME CHANGE cannot compel REASON CHANGE ...not unless, that is, accompanied by indifference of '*the peculiar*'...the shepherds compel us not to let that happen!

Small wonder that the whole matter of light overcoming darkness all fits together so logically and the whole matter of Christmas and Jesus as the ultimate light begins to make such practical sense! God has a way of dropping into our reality in such a manner.

So...what do we do about **The Light**? The choices are only two, and quite simple...we can recognize who the Light is...let Jesus visibly influence and illuminate what we do or we can pull down the black out shade and refuse to be seen in the light of what God provided for us...a simple, easy to recognize presence of himself as a human being. Saint Athanasius put it most succinctly...God became like us so that we might become like him.

In the **Light** that now shines God is no longer an abstract concept but someone to whom we can relate and follow.

Follow the instructions of the Angels to the shepherds, don't be afraid of this, your savior is born...Jesus Christ the Lord who will lead you out of darkness. Belonging to this "*peculiar*" group is entirely what is expected...a welcome and defining status by which to be known!

