

Advent Evening of Reflection

St. Mark Parish

December 1st 2025

'O Come, O Come Emmanuel'

- *Many years ago, I was given a copy of a book entitled The Spirit of Christmas by Henry van Dyke. In this book of short stories, he wrote: "Hatred and envy and contempt are the curse of life. And for these there is no remedy save love – the will to give and to bless – the will of the King Himself, Who gives to all and is loving unto every man. But how shall the hearts of men be won to this will? How shall it enter into them and possess them? Even the gods that men fashion for themselves are cruel and proud and false and unjust. How shall the miracle be wrought in human nature to reveal the meaning of humanity? How shall men be made like God?"... (and a little later in the story he concluded): "Man shall be made like God, because the Son of God, shall become a man." (Pgs. 25-26 & 28)*
- Welcome to our Advent Evening of Reflection... I'm Deacon Tony Conti, and our theme tonight is "O Come O Come Emmanuel..."
- Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him **Immanuel**."
- **Advent and Christmas were never about what we were going to get... They were always about Who we already have... Emmanuel... God with us...**
- Tonight, we're going to try to leave all of our cares behind for a short time, and rest in the presence of God, in our Father's House...

- I'd ask you to please relax, close your eyes for a few minutes, and listen carefully to the words of a familiar hymn, sung perhaps, in a very unfamiliar way, by Kevin Briody, a local Connecticut Singer/Songwriter from his CD: The Gathering...
- Perhaps tonight, we'll hear these words anew, as if for the very first time...
 - ***Play Song...*** (O Come, O Come Emmanuel - From: *The Gathering... A Christmas Collection by Kevin Briody*)
- The words of this hymn were taken from the 'O Antiphons,' of Advent, which are the seven antiphons recited by the Church from December 17th to the 23rd at Evening Prayer...
- These antiphons reflect the prayers of all human beings, of all generations, of all times... They're the prayers of all who seek peace... The prayers of all of us here tonight who seek the King of Peace...
- The primary question we might ask ourselves tonight is this: When we awake on Monday January 5th 2026, and return to the normalcy of our daily lives – Will our lives be different... or will we just be exhausted and spent from another busy holiday season?...
- Will we see the world and our role in it differently... or will it just be the same old grind?...
- The answers to these questions are often determined by what we're pursuing in life...
- What are we looking for?... What are we seeking?... or perhaps we might even ask: Who are we seeking?
- Many of us are here tonight because we want more than the world has to offer us...
- Perhaps we're seeking an end to the senseless violence... an end to the inhumanity... an end to the constant bickering and chaos... and an end to the hatred that seems so prevalent...
- Perhaps we're simply seeking some quiet, or some peace, or more meaning in our lives... Maybe we're seeking a deeper relationship with God... or forgiveness... or

encouragement... or healing... or simply some **rest** from everything going on around us and within us...

- Whatever form our seeking takes, our answers can ultimately be found in Emmanuel - 'God with us...'
- Most of us picture Jesus as looking just like **us...**
- The fact of the matter is that Jesus does look like us – He looks like **ALL OF US...** Every race, creed and color...
- Because all human beings, (regardless of race, creed, or color), are beloved sons and daughters of one and the same God...
- You see – We're all basically the same... and we're all connected... regardless of our religious, ethnic, political, or national differences...
- Until we're able to begin to learn to embrace this basic truth of our existence – We will invariably continue to divide, and separate, and judge, and hate... rather than learning to see Christ in all of our fellow human beings... even in our perceived enemies...
- This is admittedly a tall order... but if we truly want to be faithful to Christ's teachings... if we truly want to welcome Christ more fully into our hearts this Christmas Season, (and every day) - Jesus requires nothing less of us...
- Tonight, we're going to spend some time reflecting upon the words of this hymn, verse by verse; and try to see these words as a universal prayer... a prayer that lives deep within the hearts of all mankind...
- So, let's begin with the first verse...

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears.

- In the busyness of modern life, do we sometimes feel like a captive?
- Like we're on a treadmill that we can't seem to slow down, or get off...
- Although we seldom reflect upon it - We're often captives of our own making...
- We can imprison ourselves in ignorance, stubbornness, pride, un-forgiveness, self-condemnation, fear... We each have our own unique lists...
- Do we sometimes feel like an exile... Like we're far from our true home?
- We are in fact all exiles... because we're all far from our true home...
- The fact of the matter is that we're all just passing through this life... We're all sojourners in this world...
- In order to keep things in perspective - We need to constantly remind ourselves that this isn't our permanent home...
- We're here for a short time to learn how to live fully human lives...
- It's in learning how to love, that we become more fully human...
- Jesus came to show us how to live... by showing us how to love...
- Jesus' teachings taught us that the fullness of our humanity hinges on our embrace of empathy and compassion as a **way of life**... because without these virtues, we're simply unable to live fully human lives...
- In many ways, our trials in life are designed to teach us these virtues... to help us to appreciate how important they are in living a full and satisfying life...
- Empathy and compassion are always choices that we can exercise in every situation we face in life... but only if we choose to do so...
- Jesus' life was a life of empathy and compassion for others...
- Advent is a good time to ask ourselves if we're really living as He would have us live...
- Specifically - Are we doing our best to try to live lives of empathy and compassion?...

- David Brooks, a columnist for The NY Times wrote: "*The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference, and indifference is an absolutely terrible state to endure.*" David Brooks - NY Times 3/28/25
- Our world at large, seems to be suffering from an epidemic of indifference... from a shortage of empathy and compassion for others...
- And each of us, as practicing Christians, are called to play a role in countering this epidemic...
- This Advent, and every day; we're called to end our indifference toward others, by choosing to make empathy and compassion bedrocks of the life we will live going forward...
- By refusing to turn our heads when we see injustice and cruelty...
- By advocating for those less fortunate than ourselves...
- By doing our small part each day in treating everyone we meet with the dignity and respect due every human being...
- Every act of kindness... every act of empathy... every act of compassion... every act of forgiveness... every act of charity... **no matter how small**... ripples through the world... making it just a little more tolerable... a little more peaceful... and a little more hopeful...
- Advent is a time of reassessment... a time to decide how we will welcome Jesus into our world, and perhaps even more importantly: What type of world we will welcome Him into...
- The incarnation of the Son of God wasn't a one-time historical event...
- We're asked each day to invite Christ to be re-born within us, and within the world; but in order for this to happen, we must desire it sufficiently to be willing to allow Him to **transform** our lives... to change us... and change is never easy...
- The world and each of us here tonight are crying-out for God to ransom us, as He did the Israelites...
- In essence – We're crying out for God to save us from **ourselves**...

- From the pain and anxiety that we've caused ourselves, through both our actions, and our inactions...
- We're here tonight not to condemn ourselves or the world... but rather, to awaken ourselves to those **choices** in our lives, that are life-giving, and to become aware of those **choices**, that may be life-draining...
- Our choices form the fabric of our lives...
- We can choose to continue down the familiar road that we've followed in the past, or we can decide to celebrate this season differently this year, by altering our course...
- If we hope for a different life, and a better world – We must be open to change...
- And the change that's necessary always starts with each of **us**...

*O come, O' Wisdom from on high,
Who ordered all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go.*

- Are we following the path of knowledge in our lives, with God's wisdom as our guide; or are we just running to keep up with the crowd?
- The common lament among most people today, from all states of life is: "***I'm so busy***"
- And the corollary to this is: "***I'm so tired***..."
- This season of Advent can either intensify that busyness and accentuate our exhaustion, or it can slow us down... It all depends on what our priorities are... and it always comes back to the choices that we make each day...
- When I retired from full time work years ago, I was always asked the same question from just about everyone I met...
- The question was: "*What are you going to do?*"
- It's as if our very existence is dependent upon us constantly being gainfully busy...
- Providing, moving, accomplishing... What are you going to do?

- Jesus showed us through the example of His life that just being is often more important than doing...
- Throughout the Gospels, Jesus made time for rest and prayer...
- Like Jesus, we must learn to find balance in all aspects of our lives...
- We can become so distracted with endless tasks and commitments at this time of year, (and every day), that it becomes nearly impossible to find any peace in our lives...
- We can continue trying to live up to the expectations of the world and of others... But if we choose to do so, we'll only find frustration and disappointment; because we're not on this earth to fulfill the expectations of the world or of others... We're here to fulfill God's plan for our lives...
- And that plan is written on our hearts, and revealed to us day by day through the ordinary circumstances and demands of our daily lives...
- A man once observed upon the occasion of his retirement, that he used to get annoyed at all of the interruptions that occurred each day on his job; until one day; he realized, that his job **was** the interruptions... and that how he behaved during those interruptions revealed a lot about who he was as a person...
- The same is true in our daily lives - Every moment of every day, God calls us to do His work... And often, God's callings look a lot like interruptions...
- We may be asked to offer assistance to someone who needs our help, despite the fact that our day is already filled with planned tasks...
- We may be asked to take the time to read a child a story, when we're tired and worn-out after a long day...
- We may be asked to help a neighbor or a friend, at a most inconvenient time...
- We may be asked to forgive a long-standing hurt...
- We may be asked for a smile, or a small act of kindness for someone who's been unkind to us...

- When God interrupts our daily routine – How often do we recognize and heed the call?
- Life is certainly not about resting on the sidelines for the remainder of our days...
- But if we remain attentive, and slow ourselves sufficiently to hear God's still small voice... God will lead us to fulfill His will for our lives, no matter where we may find ourselves...
- At this time of year - If we choose to follow the whims of the world, we may work ourselves into a frenzied state to attend numerous gatherings... prepare fine foods... and purchase gifts to delight all of our friends and family... and there's nothing inherently wrong with these things, in fact; they're all good: in **moderation**; but the world doesn't understand moderation...
- What can derail us in life is the American credo that if a little is good, then more must be better...
- Yet we know from our own life experiences that more of anything is seldom the answer...
- And amidst all of this frenzied activity, we seldom count the cost... the cost of things lost in our exhausting efforts, as well as the cost of things not found...
- Many years ago, I read a wonderful booklet about a woman in the 1950's, who walked over 25,000 miles all across the United States on a pilgrimage for peace – She called herself the "Peace Pilgrim," and in reading about her life, I concluded that she was a woman of great wisdom because she was clearly following the path of knowledge, in full communion with God's particular will for her life... In the booklet about her life, she was quoted as observing the following one day on her journey:
 - *"After a wonderful sojourn in the wilderness, I walk along the streets of a city which was my home (for) awhile. It's 1:00 PM. Hundreds of neatly-dressed human beings with pale or painted faces are hurrying in rather orderly lines to and from their places of employment... In the poorer sections I am*

tolerated. In the wealthier sections some glances seem a bit startled, and some, are disdainful. On both sides of us, as we walk; are displayed the things which we can buy, if we are willing to stay in the orderly lines, day after day, year after year... Thousands of things are displayed – and yet, the most valuable things are missing. Freedom is not displayed, nor health, nor happiness, nor peace of mind. To obtain these, my friends, you too may need to escape from the orderly lines, and risk being looked upon disdainfully.

Steps Toward Inner Peace, Peace Pilgrim; Pg. 26 (Peacepilgrim.org)

- Perhaps this Advent, we too may need to break from the orderly lines of the world, to find our way to God... or perhaps just as importantly: to allow God to find us...
- We're reminded that the real treasures of life have lasting value - They're eternal...
- Our families, our children, our close friends, are our real treasures...
- Our character, our integrity; the values that we choose to live our lives by are our real treasures...
- Only these treasures are worth our sacrifice... our service... and our love... Because only these treasures have eternal value...
- Jesus knew Who He was and what really mattered in life, and so should we...
- It's very easy to lose our perspective in life when we're busy, when we're stressed, and when we're chasing after the wrong treasures...
- These things can lead us to a life of distraction and dissipation, which eventually wears us down mentally and physically until one day we just decide to give up and go along to get along...
- Jesus never compromised Who He was and what He stood for, by just going along to get along...
- In order to find the path of knowledge, we must be connected to source of all knowledge and wisdom... to the God who lives in our hearts... Who lives in every human heart...

- For this to happen, we must learn to make some time to reflect on our lives, and to seek some quiet...
- Early mornings and late evenings are often good times to find this solitude...
- Perhaps we might need to trim back some of our expectations and our plans this Advent season, in order to make some time to be with God...
- **It's never too late in life to call a "time-out..."**

O come, O' Key of David, come,
 And open wide our heavenly home;
 Make safe the way that leads on high,
 And close the path of misery.

- Every road that the world beckons us toward will eventually lead us to a dead end...
Every... Single... One...
- The road that Christ beckons us toward however; is a demanding road...
- The road of self-sacrifice... the road of forgiveness... the road of empathy... the road of compassion... the road of mercy... the road of selflessness... the road of peace... the road of rest... the road of surrender... and the road of acceptance...
- The road that Christ beckons us toward, is truly "the road less travelled" ... because although the principles of Christianity are fairly straightforward... we all know from our own life experiences, that Living them in our daily lives is a constant challenge...
- We choose to follow the teachings of Christ not out of fear of eternal punishment, but because we know them to be right, and just, and true...
- Jesus calls us to live a life of character and integrity, which requires sacrifice, and discipline, and commitment, and perhaps most importantly... courage...
- The courage to refuse to go along to get along... the courage to speak for those who have no voice... the courage to risk the disdain of others...

- The West Point Cadet prayer includes the following line: "*Make us (to) choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong, and never to be content with a half-truth when the whole can be won.*"
- Every minute of every day, whether we realize it or not, we choose what road we will follow with each decision we make...
- Our existence, our life, our eternal happiness, don't solely depend upon what we do
– They also depend upon who we are... and who we become...
- We're bombarded each day by voices telling us; what we must do... how we should live... what we should buy... which group is good... which group is bad... who's right... who's wrong... what's in... what's out... the list is endless...
- Each voice urging us to follow them... each voice promising happiness...
- Each of these voices claiming that they alone have the truth... and each of these voices often conflicting with the others... all of them clamoring for our attention...
- How in this malaise of noise, distraction, and chaos, are we to discern the truth?...
- It's only when we choose to quiet ourselves that we can begin to hear the **Truth** that is Christ... and it's only in our stillness, that we can learn to find Him, Who is the Way... and it's only in rest, that we can learn to embrace Him Who is Life...
- **There's wisdom in rest**...
- As we listened to this song, we heard the verse: "*And close the path to misery*..."
- We suffer when things don't go our way in life...
- When life throws us a curve ball and we don't know how to respond...
- When we lose something or someone dear to us...
- There are many forms of suffering, but there's only one answer to ultimately deal with it – Surrender...
- The redemptive nature of suffering is first and foremost a mystery of our Christian faith...

- Suffering is not to be desired, sought out, glorified, or even allowed, through our refusal to do what's in our power to alleviate it; but when suffering is inevitable, (after using all the means at our disposal to minimize it), we're called to embrace it through our surrender to God...
- This doesn't mean that we just allow life to happen to us without our intervention...
- What it means, is that once we've done everything in our limited power to alleviate suffering – We choose to accept and surrender to what remains, and make peace with it... allowing God to take over...
- One of the great lessons in life is that we're all called to accept our powerlessness...
- We're called to make peace with the realization that we're not God...
- We're called to accept the reality that life isn't like Burger King®... We can't always have it our way...
- There's a universal truth that we must never forget - ***God wastes nothing***, and therefore, even suffering and pain can be transformed into something good... but only if let go of our need to control... through our acceptance and surrender...
- Life is never without suffering, trials or difficulties; because despite our distaste for these experiences – They're often necessary for our continuing transformation...
- ***We close the path of misery through our choice to accept and surrender to what we cannot change***...
- We need to understand however; that there's a big difference between giving up and surrendering...
- When we give up, we lose hope... we feel like a failure... and we diminish ourselves...
- But surrendering is different...
- When we freely choose to surrender to God... we're not giving up, we're merely acknowledging that God has a place in our lives, and that we can often get ahead of God in trying to "fix" whatever it is that's plaguing us...

- It's accepting and believing that although things may not have turned out as we had hoped, God still has a plan for our lives, and that we need patient trust to allow that plan to reveal itself to us...
- There's a peace and a sense of relief in letting go of what we cannot change, and in learning to trust in God to transform our pain...
- And what does God transform?
- God transforms us in helping us to see through new eyes...
- When we freely choose to surrender to God - God slowly leads us along the path of knowledge and wisdom that brings new life... and new possibilities...
- We pray a prayer of surrender each time we pray the Our Father... "*Thy Kingdom come – Thy will be done...*"
- Life is a constant dance with God... Our problems arise when we insist on **leading**...

O come, Desire of nations, bind
In **one** the hearts of all mankind;
 O' Bid our sad divisions cease,
 And be Yourself our King of Peace.

- We often find ourselves living in an "us and them" world...
- In an "us and them" world; one group believes they're right, while the other side is perceived as not only wrong; but also, evil and unworthy of respect as fellow human beings...
- How can we possibly welcome Jesus into this world?
- As documentarian Ken Burns noted – There's only **us** – There is no **them**...
- Jesus never separated himself from any human being...

- Jesus refused to take the bait from the religious leaders of His time... to shun those who were considered unworthy of God's love... to condemn those who didn't fit in... to avoid those who were considered unclean... to ignore those who were on the margins of society...
- Jesus treated everyone He met with the same respect for their dignity, (that's due every human being), as fellow sons and daughters of the same Father in heaven... Regardless of their societal standing... religious belief... lack of belief... sickness... gender... or lifestyle...
- The question we must all ask ourselves this Advent, (and every day), is: **Can we each say the same?**...
- *Peace must begin in our hearts* – Hearts filled with the empathy and compassion of Christ for ***all*** human beings...
- This is the peace that Christ came to bring us – A peace for all of humanity and a peace for all ages...
- This is what we're called to celebrate at Christmas... and every day...
- The entry of the Prince of Peace into our world...
- Until we can begin to appreciate the "connectedness" of all mankind as creations of the same Father in heaven, our sad divisions will never cease...
- Everything that we do, can be an act of worship; because everything and everyone, (by virtue of their creation by one and the same God)... is Sacred...
- Every life is sacred, because of the Sacred, in every life...
- When we begin to see everyone and everything as fellow creations of the One true God, we enter the path that leads to peace...
- Everything changes when we can learn to change our point of view... when we can begin to change our perspective...
- When we can learn to respond, rather than react to life's situations...
- We're not called to administer judgment; we're not called to identify all that's wrong with the world, or even all that's wrong with ourselves...

- God ultimately calls us to only one thing... to love ourselves and others as He loves us...
- The hearts of all mankind will only be bound together one heart at a time... **and that's where we come in...**
- Our role in changing the world doesn't involve changing others, but rather; in **changing ourselves...**
- And we do that when we change our outlook – When we allow ourselves to see things differently... when we allow ourselves to begin to see through the eyes of Christ...
- We allow change and transformation in our lives when we learn to choose love over fear...
- On the opposite end - We miss the mark when we allow the world to control us... When we allow our emotions and our prejudices, to guide us... and when we try to control life itself...

Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel,

Shall Come to thee O' Israel.

- How then, can Advent, (and every day), be a time of true joy for us?
- How can we learn to rejoice in Emmanuel – God with us, in the midst of the chaos of the world that we find ourselves in?
- How can we make this Christmas Season different?...
- Perhaps we can start by learning to let go of our expectations... Not only for Advent, for but for our lives in general...
- The actor Michael J. Fox, who's been fighting Parkinson's disease for many years, was once quoted as saying: "*My happiness grows in direct proportion to my acceptance, and in inverse proportion to my expectations."*
 - Michael J. Fox, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Future...: Twists and Turns and Lessons Learned

- Will we adopt the expectations of the world, or will we choose to look deep inside, and ask ourselves what's really important?
- If we allow the world to set our expectations... we'll never be satisfied, and we'll never find peace...
- Because the world is never satisfied, and therefore is never at peace...
- And without peace, we can never truly know joy...
- For it's the King of Peace Himself, Who fills our hearts with His Joy - *If we allow Him...*
- As we've just celebrated the Thanksgiving Holiday – We need to be reminded that true peace and joy always begin with gratitude and thanksgiving...
- However; in order to experience gratitude and thanksgiving we must first learn to accept our lives just as they are... not as we wish they could be...
- This doesn't mean that we don't strive to do our best each day – Striving for excellence in our lives should be a given...
- What it means, is that we need to begin to appreciate all that we already have, and all that we already are; rather than focus on what we believe we may be lacking...
- If the Son of God, Who entered this world in the most meager of circumstances, and Who lived a full and complete life, didn't teach us how to be grateful for all that God has given us; then perhaps we've learned nothing from Him...
- God has already given us everything that we need to be joyful at this very moment, yet we often long for more...
- We can become victims of our own longing... Victims of a culture that's designed not to bring us joy, but to drive an economic engine which constantly needs to be fed by consuming more and more and more...
- When Jesus walked the earth, He lived a fully human life: He rejoiced in His Father's creation... in the people He met on His journey... in the people He dined with – Jesus was the product of the Father He worshipped...

- **And the irony is; that we all eventually become the products of the things that we worship...**

- Our spiritual journey this Advent and every day, is about learning that we're not alone...
- It's about letting go of possessions that may possess us...
- It's about letting go of titles and identities that we've allowed to define us...
- It's about letting go of family and beloved friends who must leave this world for the next; and perhaps most importantly – It's about letting go of how we *think* life **should** be, to allow God to show us how *beautiful* life **can** be...
- This Advent we're once again given the opportunity to begin again... to reflect on where we've been... what's been working... and perhaps what needs changing...
- I'd like to close with a quote from an unknown author which serves as a reminder of the journey that we're all called to make, over and over in our lives; in order to experience Emmanuel anew in our hearts each day...

"If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things, and again with things; if we consider ourselves so unimportant that we must fill every moment of our lives with action:

When will we have the time to make the long, slow journey across the desert as did the Magi?

Or sit and watch the stars as did the Shepherds?

Or brood over the coming Child as did Mary?

For each of us, there is a desert to travel...

A star to discover...

And a Being within ourselves, to bring to life." (Author: Unknown)