

## **Christmas Eve, 2006**

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### **The Very Reverend G. Thomas Luck, Dean and Rector**

“Oh come, let us adore him. O come, let us adore him. O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.”

In 1977, in my junior year of college, I spent a semester studying in London. While in London, I served as a volunteer social worker at the Social Services Unit of the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, which is located on Trafalgar Square. Trafalgar Square is in many ways the central place of London. In addition to St. Martin’s, a masterpiece of Sir Christopher Wren, the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery are located on Trafalgar Square. Towering over it all is a huge pillar topped by a statue of Admiral Lord Nelson, complete with eye patch. Nelson is famous for ignoring flags signaling retreat during the battle of Trafalgar when he held his telescope up to his eye covered by the patch and said, “Flags? I see no flags.” The Square itself is a huge roundabout, or traffic circle. Off in one direction is The Mall, the street which leads to Buckingham Palace and Ten Downing Street. Off in another direction is the street that leads to the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey. Off in yet another direction is the street that leads to the British Museum and the University of London. And off in an even yet other direction is the old city of London which is the financial and legal center of England, and where St. Paul’s Cathedral, the one in London, is located.

The Social Services Unit at St. Martin’s was begun by Dick Shepherd, the Vicar of St. Martin’s during World War I. In those days, soldiers would return from France, exit a nearby train station, and have no place to go. Dick decided that St. Martin’s was presented with a ministry by God in the context of the War and the Social Services Unit of St. Martin’s was born. Of course, many of us have heard of St. Martin’s for another reason, for St. Martin’s is the original home of the musical ensemble, the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, which had its first home in the crypt. The Academy has found better digs, but has maintained its name in honor of its first home.

My primary task at the Social Services Unit was to open the locked door when guests would ring the doorbell seeking entrance into the unit. To be

truthful, these were my first real conversations with urban poor. To my surprise, many of the guests, perhaps most, were not English. They were people who had come to England from Ireland, or Scotland, or India or Pakistan looking for a life they had not yet found. They, similar to the troops in World War I, had nowhere to go. That time spent at St. Martin's was a very good thing for a twenty-one year old. Those days at St. Martin's, surrounded by so many places of power and prestige, but dealing with the poorest of London, opened my eyes to life and its many possibilities.

For a period of time I was given the task of reading the files of all the guests, and if they had not been to the unit in a given period of time, I was to put them in what was called the "dead" file. Reading those files was especially profound. It gave me an appreciation of how thin the line is between those who are able to provide for themselves and perhaps a family, and those who, for many reasons, were simply not able to do so. What was most powerful was reading of people who at one point were functioning well, working a job, sustaining a marriage, being productive. But then one seemingly small incident would happen, the loss of a job, the devastating consequences of the end of a relationship or a death of a loved one, and a downward spiral would begin that would eventually bring them to St. Martin's. As I would put names in the "dead" file, I prayed that the reason they had not been to St. Martin's for a time was that they no longer needed the services St. Martin's offers and had gotten back on their feet, rather than the possibility that they had actually reached the ultimate bottom of the spiral. As I would walk from St. Martin's after working, and pay visits to the museums, shops, and restaurants of London I had a great appreciation for how our society rewards those who do survive on one side of the line, and how those who are on the other side of the line have a very hard life. In the nearly thirty years since I was at St. Martin's that fine line has stayed with me in my consciousness.

Tonight brothers, sisters and friends in Christ, we celebrate the birth of Jesus; Jesus who according to tonight's Gospel was born on the wrong side of the line, raised on the wrong side of the line, spent most of his time with people on the wrong side of the line, died on the wrong side of the line, and yet whose resurrection proved that if one dies striving to serve those who on the wrong side of the fine line death, in fact, is not victorious, that a human life so full of godly life and love may be killed, but not forever.

Jesus' mother, Mary, was speaking of this fine line when, in Luke, she proclaimed to her cousin Elizabeth,

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

The fine line is not so obvious unless or until one is in the position of asking for and needing some kind of public or private assistance. But on that side of the line the fine line looks huge.

The economist Amartya Sen describes the fine line as the difference between those who have **freedom** and those whose lives are dominated by what he calls **unfreedom**. Sen describes unfreedom, the wrong side of the fine line, this way:

Despite unprecedented increases in overall opulence, the contemporary world denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers—perhaps even the majority—of people. Sometimes the lack of substantive freedoms relates directly to economic poverty, which robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, or to achieve sufficient nutrition, or to obtain remedies for treatable illnesses, or the opportunity to be adequately clothed or sheltered, or to enjoy clean water or sanitary facilities. In other cases, the unfreedom links closely to the lack of public facilities of social good, such as the absence of epidemiological programs, or of organized arrangements for health care or educational facilities, of effective institutions for the maintenance of local peace and order.

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I was drawn to St. Paul's Cathedral in Syracuse largely because it resonated in my being with my experience at St. Martin's in London. Both places I believe are committed to serving the poorest among us in the name of Christ; St. Martin's through the Social Services Unit and St. Paul's through the Samaritan Center. We know here at St. Paul's that in serving the poor here we are serving Jesus' people, in serving them we are serving the babe lying in the manger.

Today there is greater awareness that the fine line between those who have freedom and those who have unfreedom goes across national and political boundaries because it is not simply based on a political system. There are citizens in our country, in our county who have lives dominated by unfreedom. And there are situations where the vast majority of people within whole regions of the world live in unfreedom, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

In order to address these horrible situations the nations of the world have agreed to a set of goals known as the Millennium Development Goals. There is information about the Millennium Development Goals in your leaflet. This past summer The Episcopal Church at its General Convention declared that the Millennium Development Goals are the primary mission of this Church. The primary purpose of these goals is to reduce by half those who live in extreme poverty, to reduce by half those whose lives are filled with unfreedom. These goals are exciting because they are achievable in our lifetimes. Among the things that are being asked in order to fulfill the goals is that people contribute 0.7%, less than 1%, of their income towards the Goals. Our federal government currently spends less than 0.3%, less than a third of one percent of our budget, on foreign development and aid. Likewise, The Episcopal Church has asked each diocese, each parish, and each parishioner to contribute 0.7% of income towards the Millennium Development Goals. If these requests were met it would be more than enough to eliminate extreme poverty, the kind of poverty that kills.

Tonight we are blessed to have among us some of the members of our fellow Sudanese Episcopalians. Most of these people have survived unspeakable horrors, horrors which we can only imagine. They have told me stories of starvation and violence, of living in a culture dominated by militant Islam where they were treated with hostility just for being Episcopalians. Just this past week the mother of one of the men here tonight has died in a refugee camp. These Sudanese Episcopalians know very well the fine line I am talking about. They believe, every one of them, that they have crossed the line just by being in this country. They are reveling in their newfound freedom by working hard, going to school, and sending what they are able back to the Sudan. Among the Sudanese here tonight are students at Onondaga Community College, Syracuse University, the State University of New York at Albany, and other institutions of higher learning. In almost every case these students are

also working. These young men and women are contemporary American heroes, as well as being martyrs for the Christian Faith.

The person whose birth we celebrate tonight proclaimed that the power of God and God's love is more powerful than any ruler on earth, more holy than any man made religious rules. He lived a life where the unfreedoms of this world were his daily bread. He took, blessed, broke and shared the bread of himself on the night of his betrayal and in Luke's words, he said, "This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me." This raises question, what is the "this" we are to do in Jesus' memory? Many have reduced "this" to the Eucharist. But "this", refers to the whole of Jesus' ministry, which is focused in this meal on the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of the bread, which he describes in this meal as his body.

In effect, Jesus is saying in this his final meal, "all that you have seen me do, all that you have heard me teach, *this* is it now here, in *this* bread, *this* bread is me. I now take *this*, bless *this*, break *this*, give *this* to you. Now, all that you have seen me do, all that you have heard me teach, eat *this*, and now do *this* in remembrance of me. As *this* bread is taken, blessed, broken and given, so am I taken, blessed, broken and given, and so shall you now be taken, blessed, broken and given." The point of the last supper and therefore the Eucharist is not simply that we are allowed to commune with God. The last supper contains a commandment, a commandment to reach across the fine line of life and to bring people across to freedom. This freedom will not be attained merely by military might. This freedom requires good healthcare for all people, quality education for all people, equality between the sexes at every level of society (including the Church), a sustainable environment with safe drinking water and shelter, and indeed this freedom requires accountability and transparency in government, in this country and in every other country.

The exciting fact is that all of this is achievable. All that is lacking is the will to make it happen. And even here, let us again be clear, it will happen. Mary has said so. Jesus has promised it. The question is whether we have eyes to see the infant Jesus in the faces of children who have no safe drinking water, or a starving mother and her son who is unable to nurse because his mother can no longer produce milk, or another single woman on the near west side of Syracuse who knows the child in her womb is also God's child, but

because of the lack of insurance may have no public hospital where she can give birth to her child, even to see Jesus in the faces of elderly or disabled people who may have no place to reside if healthcare is solely in the hands of private interests.

The good news of this night is good news for the poor, and therefore, for all of us. It is good news for all of us because so many of us spend so much of our energy fearing the fine line. We work excessively, oftentimes to the detriment of the well-being of ourselves and our families, because we are afraid of the fine line. Many are so fearful of the fine line that they have persuaded themselves that it does not exist, or that if it does, it is the fault of the people on the other side that they are there. We are so fearful of the fine line that we have difficulty looking across it and seeing that the people on the other side are just like us, and that but for the chances of this life and the fortunate circumstances of birth and parents, any of us could be on the other side of the fine line. We are so fearful of the fine line that when we see a nativity crèche we think it is romantic, rather than seeing that Jesus, Mary and Joseph are on the other side of the fine line; a teenage girl and her aging fiancée who is not the child's father, giving birth in a barn. But the crèche and the Christmas story itself are not simply another story of a poor family whose son dies tragically young because he got on the wrong side of the law. No, this story is a story about God, God coming not only into human life and human affairs, but human life and human affairs on the wrong side of the line; a poor Jewish family from an inconsequential town in Roman occupied Palestine. By coming into human life in that way, and by offering life with God to all people, the message is that all people must have life with each other in order to have life with God. Again, the message of this night is that all people must have life with each other in order to have life with God. One cannot be had without the other.

This Christmas, The Church invites all of us to see the fine line, and to do a tiny bit to try to eliminate it. You will find some large, red Christmas stockings in the rear of the Cathedral. These are Christmas Stockings for the Millennium Development Goals. Please drop in any loose change, loose bills other perhaps even a check made out to St. Paul's Cathedral with MDGs on the

memo line.

The famous bishop of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, John Chrysostom of Constantinople, once preached, “You are not truly worshiping Christ in the Sacrament on the altar unless you are also worshiping Christ in the poor outside on the street.” With humility, I would modify Chrysostom and say, “We cannot truly come and adore Jesus in the manger unless we also adore him in the poor in our community and around the world.”

And so brothers, sisters, friends in Christ, as I sang with our Sudanese friends this morning,

Yen lokku, lokku doorku.

Yen lokku, lokku doorku.

Yen lokku, lokku doorku, Yen Kritho Benydit.

O come, let us adore him.

O come, let us adore him.

O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.