

I Christmas  
27 December 2009  
John 1.1-18  
Fr. Patrick Allen

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Well, here we all are - Christmas Day +2 - and I trust by now all the packages are opened, the wrapping paper conscientiously placed in the recycling bin, correct batteries purchased and installed, devices properly programmed and connected, new clothes re-folded and even put away in drawers - although if any of this be true of you, you are far ahead of me. I like to wallow in it all a bit.

Christmas is of course a great time for the giving of gadgets: electronic coin sorters; iPods; hands-free can openers; a combination pocket knife-tire iron-alarm clock; infrared nose hair clippers. All of these things, these devices, are of course meant somehow to make our lives better - easier, more organized, even simpler. (It is the great triumph of the marketing geniuses on Madison Avenue to make us believe that we can have a simpler life by acquiring more things.) Many of these gadgets really do sort of work, or are at least fun. I was actually given one of those hands-free can openers for Christmas a few years ago, and sometimes I open a can just to watch it work!

But we know that these gadgets, all these new technologies, don't actually deliver all that they promise. We are no more effective communicators in the age of email and text messaging and twitter than we were in the days - those long ago days - of rotary dial phones or of the handwritten letter (remember those?) In fact, sometimes the new gadgets actually - almost inevitably - make things more difficult or create new problems, to be solved by new technologies, which will then create new and unexpected problems, and so on. In fact, some gadgets may reveal problems we didn't know we had. This Christmas, Ashley and I were given an electric towel warmer. Turns out all these years I've been drying off with cold towels!

I don't mean to sound like a Luddite - I'm not. I'm not even like Fr. Dan (God be praised). I'm fully connected. Wirelessly, too. And when they come for my iPhone, as Charlton Heston might have said, they can pry it from my cold, dead fingers. But we should be mindful of the things, including the technologies we allow into our lives. As the media theorist Neil Postman insisted:

*...technology must never be accepted as part of the natural order of things, ... every technology-from an IQ test to an automobile to a television set to a computer-is a product of a particular economic and political context*

*and carries with it a program, an agenda, and a philosophy that may or may not be life-enhancing and that therefore require scrutiny, criticism, and control.<sup>i</sup>*

So it's good to be aware that our gadgets have a momentum of their own. But even more importantly, while these things may make some tasks easier, or make opening cans more interesting, or may even be, as Professor Postman suggested, "life-enhancing," we know that they don't fix the real problems, though they may sometimes distract us from them, if only for a while.

Our technologies don't make the life of loving mutual submission in marriage easier.

While we should all be grateful for the medical miracles made available to us through modern technology, even in our gratitude we do well to remember that every medical miracle is really only a temporary fix, a patch, a piece of duct tape: "we are mortal, formed of the earth, and unto earth shall we return."<sup>ii</sup>

At the beginning of the last century, it was widely – if perversely – believed that a fabulous new technology called the machine gun would spell the end of war, and thus began the bloodiest century in history.

And the poor are always with us, and no iPhone "app" can fix that.<sup>iii</sup>

It's a broken world, and all our gadgets, our technologies, our grand political and social programs, the self-help section at Barnes & Noble, the presence of a pharmacist on every corner and a pharmaceutical ad at every commercial break, all our personal "schemes, dreams, and themes", as Bob Dylan says, all of these taken together are not the solution to, but only measure of, this world's brokenness.

When the entire creation groans, as St. Paul mused, the solution cannot be found within the creation. Which is not to say that we don't try to find it there. If one attempt to do so is technological gadgetry that aims to give us mastery over nature, another is a romantic submersion into nature itself. Reviewing James Cameron's new blockbuster movie and pantheistic ode to Nature "Avatar," Ross Douthat, the token faithful Catholic at the *New York Times*, wrote

*The question is whether Nature actually deserves a religious response. Traditional theism has to wrestle with the problem of evil: if God is good, why does he allow suffering and death? But Nature is suffering and death. Its harmonies require violence. Its "circle of life" is really a cycle of mortality. And the human societies that hew closest to the natural order aren't the shining Edens of James Cameron's fond imaginings. They're places where existence tends to be nasty, brutish and short.*

*Religion exists, in part, precisely because humans aren't at home amid these cruel rhythms. We stand half inside the natural world and half outside it. We're beasts with self-consciousness, predators with ethics, mortal creatures who yearn for immortality.*

*This is an agonized position, and if there's no escape upward – or no God to take on flesh and come among us, as the Christmas story has it – a deeply tragic one.*

*Pantheism offers a different sort of solution: a downward exit, an abandonment of our tragic self-consciousness, a re-merger with the natural world our ancestors half-escaped millennia ago.*

*But except as dust and ashes, [Douthat concluded] Nature cannot take us back.<sup>iv</sup>*

Which brings us to the miracle of Christmas. Into this broken world, uniting himself to this broken world, the Word which was in the beginning, the Word which was with God and was God, that Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

So, for the sake of the creation, through womb and the graced, free “yes” of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Creator has entered in. For my sake and your sake, he has taken to himself – and taken to himself forever – our full humanity, our body, the dust whereof we are made. *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.*

So in the Christmas mystery of the Word made flesh, we are given no gadget, method, or program so that with the proper tools and technique we may fix ourselves. But rather we are given something much better. He has come from the outside; he has reached in to remake us. God has not given us a tool; in Jesus, he has given us himself.

And in the Christmas mystery of the Word made flesh, we are not given a sentimental and romanticized veil to draw over Nature. But rather, in Jesus, God has taken on our nature, has entered into Nature, not to save us not to save us from our suffering (at least not yet) but to save us in our suffering, by his suffering. He is Emmanuel – “God with us,” and *with us* on whatever cross we happen to find ourselves, even those of our own making.

In the 1930's, Winston Churchill reviewed a book extolling the latest – at the time – advances in technology and contemplating what wonders were just around the scientific corner: expanded life spans and even interplanetary travel. But Churchill noted that none of those advances altered those simple enduring questions, “*Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Whither are we going?*” Against those

questions, Churchill said, “no material progress . . . however it may expand the faculties of man, can bring comfort to his soul.”<sup>v</sup>

And where might such comfort then be found? Churchill suggested, and the Church has loudly and joyously proclaimed these last 2,000 years, in the mystery of the Word made flesh, the Babe lying in the manger. It was that fact, Churchill concluded, “more wonderful than any Science can reveal, which gives the best hope that all will be well.”

And indeed it shall. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Merry Christmas.

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<sup>i</sup> Postman, Neil. *Technopoly*.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, Burial Office.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 26.11

<sup>iv</sup> Douthat, Ross. “Heaven and Nature,” *The New York Times*, 20 December 2009.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/21/opinion/21douthat1.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/21/opinion/21douthat1.html?_r=2)

<sup>v</sup> Arkes, Hadley. “A Grim Year – But Signs of Hope,” *The Catholic Thing*, 22 December 2009.  
<http://www.thecatholicthing.org/content/view/2642/26/>