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Holy Faith, Santa Fe
24 December 2024

Christmas Eve – Year C
Isaiah 9.2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2.11-14
Luke 2.1-20

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We've been hearing a lot about Artificial Intelligence lately. I actually heard about Artificial Intelligence nearly forty years ago. I had a colleague whom the firm sent to a conference dealing with what the future would hold. He returned from the conference raving about Artificial Intelligence, its massive capabilities, and how it was going to change the world. My other colleagues and I joked that we wish he had returned with some real God-given intelligence, which he solely lacked, instead of putting all his hopes in the future of Artificial Intelligence!

I'm not sure how much you know about Artificial Intelligence, but AI is defined as the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, and decision-making. Your priests had some fun with Artificial Intelligence at our clergy conference this past September when we analyzed the results of the surveys conducted in parishes across the diocese revealing what people liked about The Episcopal Church and our Anglican heritage and identity. It was amazing to see how quickly Artificial Intelligence could synthesize the opinions of hundreds of respondents and then "read" the handwritten responses of the clergy in order to see where the opinions of the clergy and the laity converged or diverged.

But there are drawbacks to Artificial Intelligence. You can't rely on AI too extensively. Like all computer systems, it can be garbage in and garbage out. You may not know that the Coca-Cola Company is facing backlash for creating this year's holiday advertisements with generative Artificial Intelligence. According to Alex Vadukul in the Style section of the Sunday New York Times a few weeks back, Coke's commercials "feature cherry-red Coca-Cola trucks driving through sleepy towns on snowy roads at night. The ads depict squirrels and rabbits peeking out to watch the passing caravans and a man being handed an ice-cold bottle of cola by Santa Claus." Coke's slogan, "It's always the real thing" is juxtaposed with a disclaimer: "Created by Real Magic AI."

I'm not sure what red trucks, sleepy towns, snowy roads, squirrels, rabbits, and a soda bottle have to do with the real Christmas! But Dylan Pearce, a critic of Coke's advertising campaign, said on TikTok, "Coca-Cola just put out an ad and ruined Christmas...To put out slop like this just ruins the Christmas spirit." Whoa, now! That's a pretty strong statement. An ad ruins your Christmas? Using generative AI ruins the Christmas spirit? If that's the case, I would suggest to Mr. Pearce and others like him that they don't know the real meaning of Christmas or the real source of Christmas spirit. Granted, when I searched generative AI for the term "Christmas," I found a lot of computer-inspired images of decorated trees, presents, and Santa Claus. When I searched for the term "Nativity," I fared a bit better with scenes of the Holy Family (Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus), stables, and mangers. But people have been taking Christ out of Christmas for a long time. After all, this is Christmas, the Christ Mass – the Mass in which we celebrate the coming into the world of the Christ, or (in Hebrew) the Messiah, or (in English) God's Anointed One. People continue to take

Christ out of Christmas for their own purposes. OpenAI is calling this season “Shipmas” for the shipping of all the gifts they’re promoting. And Outback Steakhouse calls this time of year “Steakmas.” Enough said.

How do we put Christ back into Christmas? How do we ensure that an advertisement doesn’t ruin our Christmas? How do we focus on the real spirit of Christmas so it’s not spoiled for us? I think it’s by recognizing the real reason why we celebrate Jesus Christ and this Christ Mass. We celebrate Jesus Christ and Christmas because the prophecy of Isaiah that we heard earlier has been fulfilled: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of darkness – on them light has shined...For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Aren’t we a people who have at some time walked in darkness, and the light of Jesus Christ has illumined the path which we should follow? Haven’t we at some time lived in a land of darkness, and the light of Jesus Christ has shined on us to see a better future? And consider the attributes of this Jesus: All authority rests upon his shoulders. Aren’t we glad that we don’t have to shoulder all the responsibility? Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor, full of wisdom and God-given intelligence to guide us and lead us. Jesus is the Mighty God who triumphs over our enemies and tramples down our greatest enemy, death, under his feet through his resurrection. Jesus is the Everlasting Father, who through his resurrection offers us transformative unending life, and will be with us through eternity. Jesus is the Prince of Peace who, when he comes again, will usher in an era of tranquility, joy, and contentment.

And what is the purpose of the coming into this world of the Christ, the Messiah, God's Anointed One? St. Paul, in his letter to Titus that we heard earlier, puts it this way: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all...while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." Jesus, at his coming on that first Christmas, appeared bringing salvation to all. Jesus, at his coming again that we await and expect, will effect that salvation as we are transformed for the new reality that Jesus will bring – if we accept Jesus with our God-given intelligence and, more importantly, with our God-given heart opened to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then can we join in the song of the psalmist: "Sing to the LORD and bless his Name; proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations and his wonders among all peoples...Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy before the LORD when he comes, when he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth."

To get to this point, however, we have to use our God-given intelligence and our God-given heart opened to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit to put Christ back into Christmas. My colleague of forty years ago may have been open to the power of Artificial Intelligence, but he was lacking in God-given intelligence. Computer systems may be able to generate Artificial Intelligence, but they lack a God-given heart. Critics may allow advertisements to spoil Christmas for them or ruin the Christmas spirit. I would suggest, however, then they never had the real spirit of Christmas to begin with. With apologies to Coca-Cola, it's not the real thing. Jesus Christ is the real thing. So put Jesus Christ back into Christmas. And a Merry Christ Mass to you all! Amen.