



The Presiding Bishop's Christmas Message Advent 2023

To All Clergy and Laity of the Anglican Province of America and our Communion Partners.

O that birth forever blessed, when a Virgin, full of grace, by the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Saviour of our race; and the Babe, the world's Redeemer, first revealed His sacred face, evermore and evermore!

With gratitude to Father John Hunwicke.

Over a millennium ago, in the expansive Church of Blachernae in Constantinople, elevated upon the ceiling nearest the Altar, emanated a vast icon of a Jewish teenaged girl, that same young maiden who is such a central figure in the Christmas solemnity.

On the wall there, she stood above us *orans*, her hands raised in a posture of prayer, and directly in front of her, in a halo or nimbus, an icon of her Divine Son, His hand lifted towards us in blessing. That image of the Blessed Virgin Mary is called *Platytera tou kosmou*, the Woman Broader than the Universe. Mary was great with Child (Saint Luke 2.5); her Child is Almighty God. She contained the One whom the heaven of heavens is too minute and constricted to hold.

The petite womb of Mary enthroned within the Creator of the Universe, the God who is beyond measure greater than all the galaxies that float across the night sky. The body of a girl was wider than creation.

Then one December dusk, in the cool evening air, sounded the cry of the new-born baby boy. The whimper came from a cave that served as both a feeding trough and a nursery. The cave in Bethlehem, as C. S. Lewis powerfully describes it in *The Last Battle*, 'had something in it that was bigger than our entire world.' The stable, like Mary, was great with child; very great indeed, for that Child is God.

And what is true of the immaculate womb of the All-Holy Mother of God, and what is true of the cave in Bethlehem, is also the undeniable truth of the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. Bread becomes God - *panis factus Deus*. Humbly I adore thee, Deity Unseen, whose true Presence hidest 'neath these shadows mean. *Adoro te devote, latens Deitas, quae sub his figuris vere latitas*.

Delicate small hosts of unleavened bread are refashioned by the Creator of the world to become Himself. As Mary's Baby Boy was larger than all creation, than all the solar systems and nebulae

and breadth and depth of it, so the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist is larger than the cosmic span.

On Christmas Day, the most astonishing Christmas present ever exchanged is brought to our memory. Our Lady gives back to God His own gift of grace to her, by giving to God a perfect and sinless human nature to unite inseparably and hypostatically with His divine nature, for us men and for our salvation. On Christmas, Mary is our mother, as well as the Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Because if we are one with Christ, one in Christ, as Saint Paul instructs, then Christ's Mother is our Mother as well.

When we kneel at the Altar and receive the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Eternal Logos made Flesh, true God and true Man, Our Lord's Most Precious Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity under the form of bread and wine, what the priest gingerly places in our mouths is nothing less than the same identical Body that Christ assumed from Mary and the same identical Blood which circulated in her body before it circulated in His. Our Lady is our Mother; and what do mothers do? Mamas feed their babies.

The Mother, Holy Mary, provides food for her children in this our exile, food carefully prepared for *viaticum*, way-bread for the journey, as we sojourn through this valley of tears; food to strengthen us until we arrive in our true native land with God. Bethlehem is Hebrew for 'house of bread.' And as we approach the Altar in the Holy Mass, to make our Christmas Communion, the Mother of this Bread-House, the *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer, carries from her pantry and gifts to us the living Bread which comes down from heaven, the Bread given for the life of the world, the blessed fruit of her womb, Jesus.

As we receive the Word made Flesh in our Christmas Communion, let us remember that the majestic and eternal Love Himself, Love incomprehensible, comes to make His dwelling place in our weak and sinful bodies; so that, as we ride home for our family Christmastide, we will be *Theotokoi*, God-bearers, *platyteroi tou kosmou*, those broader than the universe.

Please be assured of my love and prayers for each and every one of you and your families. A joyous and happy Christmas to you all - God bless you!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Chandler Holder Jones SSC". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Most Reverend Chandler Holder Jones, SSC
Presiding Bishop, Anglican Province of America