
Flat Screens Make Flat People

This Advent season, I am giving thanks for the gradual return of Incarnation. In 2021, after twenty months of pandemic practice, the season of Advent means the expectation, and the desire, and the hope, and the love, for Incarnation itself. O come, O come, Emmanu-El, "God With Us."

I give thanks every day that people are gradually returning, physically, to church and to local communities of faith – safely and vaccinated! Almost every week here at the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, I see someone whom I have not seen in twenty months. Each of them often says something like, "Well, I've been online and I've sure seen YOU!" And that is true. I give thanks for the church's online presence and prayer; my own church has been blessed with the resources and staff to do screens very well, and we have benefitted.

I admit I have enjoyed much of this screen experience! Certainly, we have needed online presence and Zoom meetings and screens. But I also know that our engagement of the world through screens and clicks can make us passive and selfish. Screens tend to make us think that we can view, or get, whatever we want – just by changing the channel, or the website address, or the social media platform. And, surely, we have read about our social media platforms' tendencies to show us mostly the views with which we already agree; those tendencies are narrowing us.

Further, I wonder about the rush we get by clicking on things. I have certainly enjoyed that adrenaline rush which comes from the instant gratitude of clicking. But it's almost too easy to think I am doing something constructive just by "liking" a post, or a channel, or a site. Are we living only for those adrenaline rushes? Those who like to talk have found that screens and online meetings can amplify their authority, making it seem like no one else might have another point of view at all. Screens can amplify absolutism.

Okay, when we have no other entry to a reality, screens are helpful. And they certainly help sustain previously existing relationships (note the joyous Facetime calls between distant family members)! Ultimately, however, I believe screens are unable to deliver the depth of the social reality that human beings need. Screens are flat. My sense is that screens have flattened us. Their artificial intelligence algorithms are not human yet, and yet we are being tempted to dumb ourselves down to what they offer.

Thus, my saying that "Flat screens make flat people!" Flat screens simplify us, and they simplify us negatively, often reducing us to mere opinions and statements and positions. Flat screens do not, and cannot, deliver the fullness of personhood to each other. Flat screens do not communicate the fuller mystery of human interaction, human community for the common good. It's a reason that many of us sense more political and social polarization in the past twenty months; we have been labelling each other simplistically. We have been unable to shake hands, to hug bodies, to sense the twinkles in eyes and the delights in smiles, to feel the intricate facial and body expressions when someone is speaking to us. We have been unable to taste and see, to smell and touch. Screens have been sadly simplifying us, dumbing us down.

The Christian Church, a wonderful and mysterious incarnational community, is built upon the truth that our God became human flesh. The word "incarnation" means "in the flesh!" I believe that God continues to become flesh; God continues to be real in our human flesh. Thus, we need to be with each other fully, in the flesh.

We will get there, in time. I give thanks for that hope. We will resume the full dimensions of in-person community and prayer. At our annual parish meeting last Sunday, I told the people whom I love that I give thanks for each of them, in anticipation of that day when we can fully give thanks to God with the incarnate versions of ourselves instead of the flat screen versions of ourselves!

Yes, this year, Advent is about budding incarnation. God's incarnation is being born. And our incarnation is being born, too. We are growing into the full, and full-personed, in-person, Body of Christ. O come, O come,

Emmanuel!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Rev. Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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