

Christmas day homily: 2013

Once there was a king, who would dress up as a regular person and go out and walk in his city; when he dressed like everyone else, no one knew that he was the king. His officials worried that he could be beat up, robbed or even killed.

In reply to their concerns, the king said how can I rule my people if I don't know who they are and how they live? And that is exactly what Jesus, the son of God, did for all of us. He wanted to know what we are like & so he was born a baby, like all of us.

Have you ever noticed how a baby brings out the best in us?

Strangers who ordinarily would not talk with one another are often pulled together because of smiling baby.

In the presence of a baby, the most rugged athlete becomes as gentle as a lamb. The tough minded financial wizard becomes involved in Sesame Street instead of Wall Street. Who but a baby can make an arrogant intellectual humble himself and make cooing sounds?

Perhaps that is why Christ the Lord came to us as a baby: in order to bring out the best in us. After all, his birth brings together kings & shepherds, the learned & the simple, the rich & the poor.

1. St. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is a wonderful & heart-warming story. It is filled with deeply engaging images: Mother & child, shepherds & angels, stables & mangers.

The stuff from which Christmas carols, Christmas cards, Christmas crèches are made.

While it is true that St. Luke's version can bring to mind something along the Hallmark cards way of thinking, this story can also inspire real devotion just as it certainly has inspired magnificent works of art—priceless treasures of the great masters who delighted in painting Nativity scenes.

There is a real place in the scheme of things for us to receive the Holy Child with deep sentiment; a sentiment with which we would receive any child and with which we would hope every child would be received.

2. But there is a big problem if sentimentality alone defines our Christmas experience.

For even as sentimentality can lead us to deep devotion & even adoration, sentimentality can also easily misdirect the intended focus.

As we know, there are a whole lot of folks who celebrate Christmas void of any faith content.

For some, Christmas is about skiing adventures & taking their children to see the "Nutcracker." Others look for meaning in terms of family get togethers with feasts of food & lots of presents.

3. There is something of the deepest significance wrapped in Luke's telling of the story of the holy birth. But because of our inclination to settle for hollow sentiment and trivializing clichés—it behooves us to regularly approach the story with fresh eyes less in focusing on the heartwarming, we fail to connect the serious with the deep truth that Luke's poetic narrative is intending to bring home to us.

But let us not forget that there is another story of the holy birth in our scriptures that lends itself less to sentiment and more to the heart of the matter.

This less sentimental version thrusts us into mystery, a mystery that forces us to view not only the cute little baby Jesus in a crib, but the reality that one day this cute baby grew up and was eventually nailed to a not so cute cross.

The second story of the holy birth comes to us from the gospel of John. So let's use this version as a window into the deepest meaning of Luke's Christmas drama.

St. John's gospel account of the holy birth does not begin in Nazareth with an angel's announcement to a virgin named Mary betrothed to a man named Joseph.

Rather, it begins with eternity.
It begins before time.
It begins in a mystery without a beginning or an end.
It begins in the mystery we dare to name God.

John tells us that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

These scriptures begin with the story of God's choice to go outside of Himself, to relate beyond himself, to transcend himself.

God spoke, the scriptures tell us, and there was a starry explosion of creative love.

John continues: All things were made through the Word and without the Word, nothing has come to be that was made.

This Word, in its going forth from God, becomes the creative power through which all creation is called into existence.

It is not unusual for people to be awed by the grandeur of the universe, whether they understand it as an accident of molecular chemistry or a purposeful expression of Divine love.

But for people of faith, however the world came to be in all of its magnificent splendor, it is but the prelude to an even bigger cosmic event.

Returning to John's gospel: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
The more literal translation is more eloquent: The Word became flesh & pitched his tent among us.

The creative Word spoken in the beginning became the incarnate Word, the enfleshed Word, and as Jesus pitched his tent among us, even as He continued to live in the bosom of the Father and continued to live in this Mystery of all mysteries.

God made a choice to contain Himself within our flesh.

God chooses to render Himself not only vulnerable but absolutely vulnerable as a newborn baby who shivers in the night cold & wishes to be fed by his Mother when hungry.

4. Returning for a final time to John's gospel: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us—yet the world which was made through him knew him not. He came to his own, and his own people received him not.

The Word became flesh and became both an outcast from religious society, as well as a refugee from his country of birth because of Herod's desire to end his life, thus forcing his family to flee to Egypt.

He became one with all of us and became most intimately one with all who have been cast out:

With those cast out of their Mother's womb.

With those cast out because of a disability or illness they suffer.

With those cast out because of who they are.

With those cast out because of whom they love.

With those cast out for what they believe.

With those cast out because they come from another country.

With those cast out because of prejudice & hatred.

With those cast out because they are not well heeled, well born, well bred, or well educated.

5. And so our cute Christmas becomes a Feast of All refugees and outcasts, those whom the gospel refers to as the poor, those marginalized in a world that values power, and money and status above all things.

It is interesting, I believe, that the shepherds were the first to experience the good news of God's explosive love.

It's interesting because they themselves were outcasts from Jewish religious society exactly because they were unable to fulfill all the dots and tittles of religious law.

But it was to these poor shepherds that God's redemptive love was first revealed and so Christmas is a feast of hope for all who sit in darkness; it is a light that shines in the darkness, a darkness, however, that can never overpower the light of Christ.

Ultimately, we retell this story because it is at the core of our faith: this story is about faith & how we choose to live out our daily lives with that faith.

But we believers must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of the arrogantly religious who lived in the time of Jesus as well as those who live among today:

Consequently, we must never allow faith to be completely replaced by creed,
Or allow worship to be replaced by discipline,
love must never become a habit;
because when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past,
When faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain,
When religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion,
Should this happen, then the message of Jesus has become meaningless.

The incredible belief that God entered our world and became one of us so that we might be saved from ourselves opens for us a broader vision of life and what life is all about.

Do we get this?

Do we understand that the reason that God pitched His tent among us was so that our world could explode with the wondrous gift of God's love for us?

Do we get this?

Considered outcasts by the religious establishment, hardworking, smelly shepherds were the first to experience the magnitude of God's love for us.

Do we get this?

Christmas is the Feast of All Outcasts, those whom the gospel refers to as the poor, those marginalized in a world that values power, money and status.

And as a result, Christmas is a feast of hope for all who sit in darkness, for a light shines in that darkness and the darkness will never be able to overpower the light of Christ.

Because it is this understanding of the birth of Jesus Christ that allows us all the opportunity of having a truly joyous Christmas...