

24 December 2005

First Mass of the Nativity

Isaiah 9:2-4,6-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love being here this evening, and I am grateful to you for being here. I am grateful to everyone who has prepared so diligently for our celebration. I love worshiping here, and it's for so much more than the beautiful liturgy and music – as stirring, elevating, and delightful as it is. It's for the people here, for all of you. There's no better place to be than together with you to welcome our new-born King and to renew together our welcome to him to be in our hearts – lighting candles, visiting the crèche, singing carols, hearing his story, making our communion together.

If you rarely darken the doors of a church, I am especially happy that you are here because God comes for everyone, because I am grateful for what you bring to our table. And because not so many Christmases ago, I thought all this was bunk.

Last week I heard of a survey of religious attitudes at the University of California at Santa Cruz – home of the Banana Slugs.¹ A couple of decades ago, the students made waves by insisting that the slimy, bright yellow, shell-less mollusk, the banana slug, be the school's mascot – not bears, wolverines, tigers, or eagles, nothing ferocious or powerful, but the lowly, repulsive banana slug which lives in the redwood forest of the campus. The students had a decided preference for the humble and overlooked.

When asked their thoughts about Jesus, most of the students smiled, had positive associations, and spoke eagerly. "Jesus was beautiful." "I want to be like Jesus." "Jesus was enlightened and had higher truth." But when the question became "What do you think about when you hear the word 'Christian'?", students frowned, looked down, and made negative comments. "Christians have taken the teachings of Jesus and really messed them up." "Christians are dogmatic and closed-minded." And, "Christians should be taken outside and shot."

While I hope that last comment is hyperbole, I do appreciate their point of view. They like Jesus, but don't much like Christians. This strikes me as quite representative of the views of most non-Christians. So often we Christians come off as strident, judgmental, legalistic, admonishing, and just plain stuck up. But our call is not to make people feel guilty and inadequate and excluded, but loved and accepted and welcome. Our message is that God loves you, God is with you, you're not alone.

That's why everyone loves the story of Christmas. That's why it speaks to all people – not just Christians. It's sort of a parable of God's love for every person. If we take the story seriously, and ponder it deeply in our hearts, it changes us. We think about God differently; we think about

¹ Survey sent by the Rev. Edward White who pulled it from Dan Zimball's *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, Zondervan (2003), pp. 79-80.

ourselves differently; we think about other people differently; we think about the world differently. We become more aware of God's presence with us, that God is with us in the ordinary things of life, in our relations with other people.

Nikos Kazantzakis tells a charming parable in his book *The Last Temptation of Christ*. He writes:

A man came to Jesus and complained about the hiddenness of God. 'Rabbi,' he said, 'I am an old man. During my whole life, I have always kept the commandments. Every year of my adult life, I went to Jerusalem and offered the prescribed sacrifices. Every night of my life, I have not retired to my bed without first saying my prayers. But . . . I look at the stars and sometimes the mountains – and wait, wait for God to come so that I might see him. I have waited for years and years, but in vain. Why? Why? Mine is a great grievance, Rabbi! Why doesn't God show himself?'

Jesus smiled and responded gently: 'Once upon a time there was a marble throne at the eastern gate of a great city. On this throne sat 3,000 kings. All of them called upon God to appear so that they might see him, but all went to their graves with their wishes unfulfilled.

'Then when the kings had died, a pauper, barefooted and hungry came and sat upon that throne. "God," he whispered, "the eyes of a human being cannot look directly at the sun, for they would be blinded. How then, Omnipotent, can they look directly at you? Have pity, Lord, temper your strength, turn down your splendor so that I, who am poor and afflicted, may see you!"

'Then – listen, old man – God became a piece of bread, a cup of cool water, a warm tunic, a hut and, in front of the hut, a woman nursing an infant.'

'Thank you, Lord,' he whispered. 'You humbled yourself for my sake. You became bread, water, a warm tunic and a wife and a child in order that I might see you. And I did see you. I bow down and worship your beloved many-faced face.'²

If we are humble, if we open our hearts and minds to wonder, God shows us his splendor, his presence with us all of the time. This Christmas as we welcome the Prince of Peace, as we pray for the peace of the world, weighing in our hearts is the war in Iraq. But even in that violence and horror, God is there – bringing peace and love. Thursday's paper published the letters of several soldiers who were reflecting about being away from home this Christmas. Major Richard Spainhour has been collecting toys for the Toys for Tots program in Iraq. He wrote,

This will be a hard Christmas for me and my family – our first Christmas apart since I married and became a father. Knowing that just as on every other day here, I will be roused by the beeping of my watch alarm on Christmas instead of the prods and whispers of my daughters, eager to go downstairs and open presents, will hurt.

But when I tip the bag of stuffed animals and plastic race cars, mailed to me by family, friends and the second-grade class that adopted me at the start of my tour, into that Toys for Tots box, I will feel just like Santa Claus.³

That generosity, that love for people regardless of one's own circumstances, is what brings good cheer and makes us jolly like Santa Claus. If we want to find God, if we want to experience his

² Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Simon & Schuster (1960), pp. 189ff. Quoted by Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality*, Hodder & Stoughton (1998), pp. 73-74.

³ Richard Spainhour, 'Deck the Halls,' *The New York Times*, 22 December 2005.

presence in our lives, we reach out to others and find someone to love regardless of our circumstances.

God becoming a human being means that we should see God in other people and God in ourselves. Indeed, we become one the ways God acts in the world, one of the ways he loves people. The 16th century Spanish mystic S. Teresa of Avila wrote:

Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which
Christ's compassion must look out on the world.
Yours are the feet with which
He is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which
He is to bless us now.⁴

Unlike S. Teresa, I am not at all prone to having mystical experiences, and certainly view them with some suspicion, but last week I had a very strange sensation when I went to give communion to a dear parishioner – I thought for the last time. She is so devout and so appreciative of communion. She was in the hospital, and as I leaned over her bed to give her the body of Christ, out of nowhere I suddenly felt for a flashing moment that I was giving communion to the baby Jesus lying in the manger. It was very strange and not wholly lucid or rational. I'm not used to such mystical enthusiasm.

It made more sense to me later when I began thinking about a sermon for this evening and I read T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Cultivation of Christmas Trees.' Eliot's conclusion interpreted that moment in the hospital for me. He writes,

Because the beginning shall remind us of the end
And the first coming of the second coming.
A birth reminds us of death, and Jesus' birth, the first coming, reminds us that Jesus comes again – most definitely when we die and leave this world. Birth and death and Christmas point us to a wonder bigger and more mysterious than we can fathom, but a wonder that fills all of life.

Eliot says that the way to meet Jesus in joy is as a child, a child
For whom the candle is a star, and the gilded angel
Spreading its wings at the summit of the tree
Is not only a decoration, but an angel.
The child wonders at the Christmas Tree:
Let him continue in the spirit of wonder . . .
So that the reverence and the gaiety
May not be forgotten in later experience,
In the bored habituation, the fatigue, the tedium,
The awareness of death, the consciousness of failure. . .

⁴ Quoted by Rolheiser, p. 69.

S. Mary, heavy with child, had made the long, arduous journey to Bethlehem. She had found shelter in a wretched stable, probably a cave in a rocky hillside – much like Jesus' tomb. She gave birth to a son, whose conception in her she couldn't understand. She wrapped her baby with strips of cloth – swaddling clothes, quite similar to the burial cloths used to wrap the dead, and then she laid him in a manger, an animal's feeding trough. A band of shepherds – disreputable, irreligious, coarse shepherds – showed up, and they (of all people!) reported a vision of angels rejoicing and declaring this child to be the Messiah, a savior, the good news of great joy. Mary's response: she ponders all of these things in her heart.

Sister Wendy Becket suggests that if we would like to understand the joy of Christmas, of God coming to us, at a deeper level, “then let us try, even for a few moments, to find a place apart. (No one will miss us for so short a time.) Be still; let the wonder become real to you; accept the child as Lord; and thank him for such inconceivable love. Let Jesus give himself. Then go back to the festivities and give him to others.”⁵

I wish you a Merry Christmas – a Merry Christmas full of love, rejoicing, and wonder!

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵ Sister Wendy Becket, 'The Gifts That We are Asked to Give Away,' *The Church Times*, 24 December 2004, as reprinted in the December 2005 newsletter of the Church of the Resurrection, New York City.