

## Homily for Christmas

Walking in darkness. Dwelling in a land of gloom. Yokes that burden. Poles on shoulders. Rods of taskmasters. Boots tramping in battle. Cloaks rolled in blood, burning them as fuel for flames. What an interesting set of images the Prophet Isaiah gives us in our first reading today! Sounds very cheery and Christmas-y, doesn't it? Not quite. But after laying down this context – the background story, as it were – Isaiah proclaims his messianic prophecy: “For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.”

You know, on this holy celebration of Christmas, we often focus on the joy, the peace, and the hope of that night that changed human history forever. But, to really receive this joy, peace, and hope, we really have to understand the context – the background story, as it were. And the context? Well, as we heard in the Gospel – Joseph and the very pregnant Mary had to leave Nazareth to go to Bethlehem to be enrolled in Caesar Augustus' census – according to Google Maps, a 34 to 37 hour journey on foot, depending on your route! And then – “the time came for her to have her child”, but she had to lay him in an animal feeding trough – a manger – because there was no decent lodging, let alone a sanitary hospital. And then – dirty, smelly shepherds, who were struck with fear – not family members filled with joy – were the first to congratulate this Holy Family.

But, into this context – an angel of the Lord announces: “in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ the Lord” ... “And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.””

You see, Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah of the world, was not afraid to be born into the utter mess and chaos that He found Himself. If we were in such a situation, we would desperately try to arrange everything so that nothing would go wrong – after all, this was the Savior of the world! And yet... And yet, He chose to be born right into the midst of the darkness of this world shrouded by sin and sadness, not in the finest palace filled with riches and encrusted with jewels. And He did this to show us the radical truth of Christianity – that God is love.

God Himself was born as a human – a child – in the conditions He was, so that we could receive His love in the condition we are, right now – right now. We do not have to have a picture-perfect life and flawless morals first for Him to love us. He loves us as we are – just as we are. But because He loves us, He cannot leave us where we are. No, He calls us up – He calls us to more. The reason God became man was because He loves us and wants to be in real relationship with us. But, as Scripture tells us: “In this is love: not that **we** have loved God, but that **he** loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.” What this means is that *first* we must let Him love us!

Letting God love us first requires us – surprisingly, but truthfully – to become weak, to become vulnerable, to become like little children ourselves. You see, it’s in the weakness of our lives, “where our hearts feel most broken, most insecure, most in agony, most afraid” that we find out how much we need a savior. In our sinfulness, our deprivation, and our weakness “our familiar ways of controlling and manipulating our world are being stripped away and we are forced to let go from doing much, thinking much, and relying on our self-sufficiency.” These are the crosses and the trials of life, which we nearly always don’t like, and so futilely try to avoid. But it’s in these “dirty, smelly shepherd”, “mangy manger” places in our lives that we truly find Jesus. And it’s precisely here – in our need – that we can truly encounter Him heart to heart and soul to soul.

And so my friends – church, Mass, the sacraments, prayer, morality – these are not the ends of the spiritual life – these are the means to truly enable us to grow in personal relationship with Jesus. To this end, I invite you to please take one of the bulletins from the ushers handing them out after Mass this evening – our Christmas gift to you. Jesus truly is the greatest present God has ever given us. But first, we must receive Him in faith. And then, we can offer Him in return the greatest gift we could ever give Him – our hearts, our souls, our very lives. God bless you.