

Homily for Christmas

We've all probably heard the popular Christmas expression: "Jesus is the reason for the season". It reminds us that the real reason we share gifts, and decorate Christmas trees, and sing Christmas carols is to help us more fully celebrate the birthday of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And I believe we really need such reminders to help us focus on the true meaning of Christmas. Because as we all know, Christmas has undergone a bit of commercialization – with the wonderful gifts, and the lovely trees, and the beautiful carols themselves – almost becoming the "goal" of this holy season. So yes, Jesus truly is the reason for this season. But, what then is the reason for Jesus?

You know, sometimes, just as it's easy for us to focus more on the commercial side of Christmas, so too, can it be easy for us to stop short and just focus on the Christ *child* – the little baby Jesus, the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, who lay in a stable with no crib for a bed. But of course we know that God became a baby, so as to one day grow into a man – a man who would one day offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice on the cross to take away our sins and bring us back into a loving relationship with His Father.

As we hear in the Gospel of Luke today, Mary wrapped Jesus “in swaddling clothes and laid him in a *manger*, because there was no room for them in the inn.” Now, often times, when we think of the manger, we usually think of a manger scene – with a straw-filled stable and animals keeping company on the side, with the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph caring for their newborn Son, and the shepherds and heavenly host en route to adore. But really, a manger is a trough or a box, often made of stone or wood, that’s used to hold food for animals. Manger comes from the same root as the Italian word, ‘*mangia*’, which means “eat”. And if you’ve even eaten dinner at an Italian family’s house, you may have kept hearing over and over again, “*mangia, mangia*”, until you can’t move anymore!

But, what does a feeding trough for animals have to do with the reason for Jesus Christ coming to earth? Well, our Gospel today was taken from the Gospel of St. Luke. And one of the unique focuses of Luke’s Gospel is on food. In a way, it seems like in Luke, so much of Jesus’ ministry takes place on the way to a meal, or at a meal, or even after a meal. Think about it in your own life this way: Do you remember all those times you sat around the table with your family, telling stories from the good old days? Or have you ever been to a lunch meeting for work, or to your company Christmas party? It seems that so much of life centers around food! And so, it should be no surprise that Jesus wants us to understand that so much of the spiritual life also centers around food.

Think about when Jesus was at the wedding reception at Cana, when he changed water into lots of wine. Or think about when Jesus had thousands of people on a hillside, and He took some fishes and loaves and fed everyone, with food to spare. But above all, the greatest meal Jesus wants us to think of is the Last Supper. At that last supper, Jesus knew full well that the very next day He would die on the cross. And wanting to leave to all future generations a way of making present that one saving sacrifice, He gave His disciples His very Body and Blood under the forms of bread and wine to be their true spiritual nourishment. And so, in our Gospel story today, by being told the little detail of where the infant Savior slept, it is revealed to us, that as the Messiah, He was to become the true sustenance of the whole world! And what's more the very name of that little town of Bethlehem is a name which literally means "House of Bread". The Bread of Life was born in the House of Bread! And this is the reason for Jesus – to nourish us and to satisfy our deepest hunger – for love and for peace. My friends, all of us are searching for such things, and it begins here with our celebration of Christmas.

To close, I'd like to share a little story, which occurred during my final years at St. Vincent's Seminary in Latrobe, where I spent six years in formation for priesthood. One weekend I was in the basilica for Mass, and it was time for Holy Communion. I was seated in the front pew, and noticed a little boy with his arm in a cast standing next to his mother. She had just received the Body of Christ. And as she turned around to go back to her place, the boy with one arm tugged his mother's sleeve, and looking into her eyes said to her, "Mom, you got Jesus". I quickly saw in that moment how little children in their innocence could help us bigger children see how God truly comes to meet us and nourish us in this great sacrament. So, may you encounter in a special way our merciful Savior this Christmas season. And in the Eucharist we celebrate today, may He fill you with His abiding love and peace. God bless you.