

Tonight, as we celebrate the birth of Christ and the beginning of Christianity, we allow ourselves to move away from the busyness of the past few weeks so that we can reflect together on the significance of the mystery of God becoming human. During the days of Advent, it was probably difficult for many of us not to be sometimes preoccupied with activities which have little to do with Jesus's birth. We had to wrap presents, bake cookies, write Christmas cards, decorate our homes. In that whirlwind of "things to do", we might not have taken much time to think about the most amazing event in the history of the world, God choosing to become human, to take on our flesh, to become like us. The Incarnation is the central truth of our faith, the truth that makes our religion different from all others, yet it is very difficult for us to even begin to fathom its meaning because it's bigger than we can even imagine. It's a transformation unlike any other, so there are no comparisons we can make to help us understand it. God becoming human is more significant than anything that's happened in the world before or since the first Christmas. – more amazing than a man walking on the moon, more mind-boggling than all the scientific, medical and technological discoveries in the last 2000 years. God taking on human flesh changed everything; it brought an utterly new perspective to our world; it altered all of history! The question for us to reflect on tonight is: what does God's decision to become human mean for us living now, so many years after Christ's birth?

Hopefully, we will find some answers to that question in the Scripture for this evening's liturgy. In the first reading, Isaiah predicts that when the long-awaited child is born, all those who walk in darkness will see a great light; they will rejoice at the harvest because their burdens will be lifted. And in the Gospel for this liturgy, the angels announce that they bring good news of great joy because the Savior is born. The sign that He is the long awaited One is that He will be found in a stable wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Yet here we are two thousand years after Christ's birth and all our troubles have not been taken away and we are not all living in great joy. In truth, the world might appear to be filled with greater darkness now than in the days of Isaiah or at the time of Jesus' birth, not the setting for the joyful harvest party which Isaiah described.

Unless, of course, we allow ourselves to see the great light and to recognize the meaning of the sign. That's what can make Isaiah's prophecy and the announcement of the angels really be good news! Then, we'll have the joy that the prophet promised us, not because there will be no more pain and suffering, not because all wars will cease, but because we will live in the wonder of knowing that God loved us so much that He chose and chooses still to be with us in our struggles, caring about our pain, sharing our joys, longing to soothe our hurts. Maybe the real impact of God becoming one of us comes to each of us when we begin to understand that the ultimate meaning of Christmas is that by loving us enough to become one of us, God gave us the ability to love one another in the same way that God loves. By choosing to be born in a stable to a poor family, He also sent us the message that, in our loving, we are to favor those whom Christ favored, the poor, the outcast, the weak, the vulnerable.

The Gospels are replete with stories of Christ as an adult walking among those who were poor, eating with sinners, forgiving prostitutes, healing the sick. The Evangelists describe Jesus's constant reminders to us that we are to live and love as he did, caring most for those among us who have the greatest need. To encourage us to imitate his indiscriminate graciousness toward the most vulnerable, Jesus even made us a promise. He assured us that, if we do as He did, the good that we do for the saddest, the most downtrodden of our sisters and brothers will be as though it were done to him. In truth, his gift to us was giving us a way to have Christmas every day. For when we live as Jesus did, we allow Christ to be born into the world again and again. So, Christmas isn't just about the birthday of Jesus celebrated every December 25. Christmas is an on-going event; Christ's birth can take place within us every day of the year, every time we choose to love as He did. When we are compassionate to the poor person begging on the street, to the relative who chooses not to talk to us, to the friends who have betrayed us, to our vulnerable aging parents or our drug-addicted teen-agers, we're making Christmas happen again; we are giving birth to Christ in the many guises he chooses to visit us.

Often when I think of God speaking to our hearts to encourage us to be loving, I remember an old French legend I heard many years ago about a shoemaker named Martin who lived in the city of Marseilles. One Christmas Eve, as he sat in his shop reading about the visit of the Magi to the Infant Jesus, he wished that he too could see the Christ-child and give him a gift. He thought about the tiny white leather shoes, his finest work, which he would offer the Infant if he saw him. That night, in his sleep, he heard a voice calling him. "Martin," the voice said, "you wished to see me. Tomorrow I shall pass by your window. If you bid me enter, I shall be a guest at your table."

Martin could hardly sleep the rest of the night. He rose early, cleaned his shop, prepared food for his holy guest, and took up his vigil at the window. Soon he saw an old street-sweeper pass by, blowing on his hands to warm them. Feeling sorry for him, Martin invited him to come in and have a warm drink. An hour later, a young, shabbily clothed woman, carrying a baby, passed Martin's window. Martin welcomed her into his shop, worried because she looked ill. When the woman told him she was on her way to a hospital, but had no money, Martin gave her both food and money. He saw then that her baby had no shoes, and, without hesitation, he placed the little white ones, his finest work, on the infant's feet.

Martin stayed at his post by the window all day. As the hours went by, many needy people passed his window and shared his hospitality, but Christ, the expected Guest, did not appear. Disappointed, Martin told himself that it must have been only a dream after all. But as he sat down to supper, his little room was suddenly flooded with a strange light. There appeared before him then, one by one, the poor street sweeper, the sick mother and her child, and all the people whom he had helped during the day.

And out of the silence, Martin heard the gentle voice that had called him the night before, saying now: "I was a guest at your table many times today. Did you not recognize me?"

Let us pray for one another that we will continue to see the great light, to remember the good news, and to recognize and welcome Christ in whatever guise He comes. Then we will witness Him being born again and again in our hearts, in our times, and in our homes.

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