

## Christmas, Year A

The crib, the hangings and the carols ringing in our ears, remind us of what a special night this is. On this night was born a child who revealed God to the world in the endearing weakness of a baby emerging from his mother's womb, crying for milk to nourish his body and for love to nourish his soul, and surrounded, not by the important and powerful, but by shepherds, by men and women accustomed to respond to nature in simple, ordinary ways. The image that comes again and again in the readings of the Mass is that of light. The First Reading promises that those walking in darkness would see a great light. The Gospel reveals this light shattering the darkness of the night sky as the glory of God shines on the face of a tiny infant. God offers this gift of light to each of us here tonight and to all those we love.

If you had asked those familiar with the sacred writings of Judaism, what kind of sign they would have expected for the coming of the Messiah, I am sure they would have spoken excitedly of the lion of Judah roaring in the desert, of fire coming down from heaven, of the moon and stars whirling around the sky, the blackening of the sun, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and similar cataclysmic portents. We human beings find it hard to resist such tempting images. When Christ was born, the whole of created nature did sing, exult and dance for joy. Luke tells us this in his dramatic portrayal of the chorus of angels announcing the wonder of the Messiah's birth. But look at the sign given to the shepherds! The most simple, ordinary sign – a little baby kept warm in a tiny box of warm grass, there for the feeding of the sheep and cattle. This was a place where shepherds would feel perfectly at home. And you can imagine the simple welcome given them by Joseph and his young wife. You can imagine the simple welcome the shepherds experienced when they held this newborn baby in their arms. This is God knowing how to find a way into the hearts of anyone willing to approach him.

In the Second Reading Paul tells us that healing, liberation, meaning and life are being offered by God not to a chosen few but to the whole human race. He also tells us what we have to do to be open to receive this love. For love never forces entry. Mary had to say Yes before God could be conceived in her womb. Joseph had to say Yes to Mary. Simple and poor as his birth was, someone had to say Yes if this new-born baby was to find the necessary protection to survive the cold of a mid-winter night. Love always requires a welcome, and this goes for God's offer of love as well. If we want to do more than celebrate Christmas for reasons of nostalgia; if we want to open our hearts to the amazing offer of grace that comes with this season, then Paul tells us what we must do: we must 'give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our ambitions that are limited to this world'(Titus 2:12). There lies the challenge of Christmas.

Some of us are so caught up in the cares and occupations of life that we normally do not find time to worship God and enjoy the intimate communion with Jesus that is central to the life of the Christian community. There can be other reasons as well: reasons of hurt, rejection, confusion. Yet, such is the attraction of this night when God embraced humanity in all its life-giving goodness and in all its destructive wickedness, that we want to be here to celebrate Christmas. If there are any like that here, I hope you feel welcome and fully at home. For this church is for you, this community is for you, and Jesus truly present here in the Eucharist longs to give himself to you. Thank you for coming, like the shepherds, to be here with him. God surely welcomes you as does this community. We are like ships sailing on the ocean of life. Sometimes the seas are huge and threatening and it is not easy to avoid shipwreck. As disciples

of Jesus, we come here to the community and to the Eucharist lest we find ourselves losing our bearings. Jesus is the lighthouse that warns us of the rocks and reefs. Jesus is the star that guides our hearts to the harbour of life that nothing, not even death, can cheat us of. I hope no one will be embarrassed if I extend to everyone an invitation to come here or wherever you feel at home more frequently. If we look at a lighthouse or take our bearings from a star only once a year, there is too great a danger that we will find ourselves on a reef or drifting too far in directions that are nowhere near what our hearts really long for.

Tonight's celebration takes us to the heart of what Christianity is. How Jesus would weep to see the many ways down through history that people in his name have used Christianity as a group-identifying label to support their own personal and cultural egos and to put down others who are different. Religion is not something to be used for furthering the power and security of one's group. Nor is it another goodie in the smorgasbord of a consumer-driven society.

A religion that does not continually awaken our deepest desires is worthless, as is a religion that does not purify our hearts from the tangle of the often superficial whims that drive us; a religion that does nothing about our dysfunctional and sinful behaviour. Such false religion can even be destructive, for it can lock onto us and prevent the penetration of grace. As the word indicates, religion is that which binds us back - back to reality and back to each other as brothers and sisters sharing the human condition.

The wonderful reality that is special to Christianity is the person of Jesus who brings all human religious aspirations to a beautiful fulfillment by demonstrating that the one we call God is love and that no one is an outsider to this love. Jesus himself was crucified, so Christian faith is not about being protected, being secure, or being successful. It is not a chapter in our autobiography that flatters the self. It will never allow us to deceive ourselves into thinking that feeling good is what matters most and that anything that makes us feel good is therefore of value. It is about being real and so it is about giving us the courage to face reality in a loving way. Christianity is about hope in that it opens us to experience what becomes evident only to one who believes – namely that God is indeed love, that we do belong, and that whatever may or may not happen to us, death is not the end of things. There awaits us a complete love that we are assured of unless we choose to reject it. Christianity is about faith: that is to say it requires that we keep open to mystery and to the sacred and not close down all the windows that we do not control and that do not fit the requirements of our limited human logic. Christianity is about belief, that is to say about being in love, ultimate love, the love for which we have an innate longing. It is an affirmation that our gut reactions are ultimately sound, that our deepest longings are to be trusted.

It is certainly not about fabricating a meaning that bolsters our ego – absolutely the opposite. For Christianity states, loud and clear, that we are not independent individuals that have to make our own way and achieve what the world might call success. It is about receiving, about being dependent on a love that is real and that is for us. It is about keeping the child inside us alive. It is about wonder and delight that embraces pain as well as pleasure. It is not a phoney attempt to fend off reality by creating an enclosed world of make-believe meaning. It is about discovering real meaning through learning to love others as others and not for our own self-interest.

The history of the Christian church is reassuring, because it is filled with people who continue to give themselves in love to the mystery we call God and to the people around them. Is not this what Jesus was saying when he told us that those who give their selves away will be the ones who will discover their real selves? When we seek self, we never find or enjoy it. That is the story of the Gospels. Think of those special people who found themselves reflected in the eyes of the One in whom God's Word became flesh. There they saw that they were loved and they came alive. This has been the story of Christianity ever since and this is why we are here celebrating tonight.

Know that the open arms of the baby in the crib are open for us and for all those we love – open to forgive us, open to comfort us, open to embrace us in the simplest and most beautiful way. For God is love. God created each one of us for love and will never cease inviting us. Of all the journeys we will ever make, the most important journey is the journey to the heart. As the Christ-child comes into our hearts in communion this evening, let us allow our weary souls to experience his love. He will attract us back, for he is the one whom our souls love. Our hearts will remain restless till they rest in him.