

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS (C)
December 24, 2009

CATHEDRAL OF SAINT PAUL

BY THE MOST REVEREND JOHN C. NIENSTEDT

“O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.”

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which according to tradition marks the site of the birth of Jesus Christ, is not very large. Hence, pilgrims have to wait in long lines in order to enter this holy space. But the most remarkable aspect about the place for me is the size of its entrance. It is a small, square door, approximately 4 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Thus, to enter, one must bend down low in order to squeeze through. I believe this unique entrance was done on purpose to make an important symbolic point: namely, that one cannot truly appreciate the mystery of the incarnation unless and until one bends both mind, heart and will before the unfathomable mystery of God, the Father’s love, and the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit. For you see, the phenomenon of the God-made-flesh is a mystery that is understood only by the humble. And as a former spiritual director used to tell me: “Father, you can’t be humble until you have been humbled.”

In tonight’s first reading, Isaiah speaks about the humiliation of his fellow Jewish hostages during their Babylonian captivity by the Assyrian Army. They had suffered for 3 generations in exile. But that experience, as painful as it was, had given rise to a new vision of hope: a bright light had shown on the horizon, bringing great expectation and abundant joy. The sun was finally rising after a very long and bitter night.

St. Paul, too, in tonight’s short passage to Titus, speaks of being humbled by God’s grace-filled offer of salvation to all men and women as well as that new condition which gives rise to the blessed hope of Christ’s final coming at the end of time.

St. Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus is all about theology—it is not merely an historical account. His emphasis on the human details of this extraordinary event situates Christ’s birth in a real human world of imperial decrees, taxation and politics. This is a story about real human beings, and especially about two different kings who ruled two very different kingdoms. On the one hand, Caesar Augustus is Emperor, ruling over the all powerful kingdom of the Roman Empire. Jesus, on the other hand, emerges as a king of a wholly different sort, born to peasant parents who have literally no place to spend the night on their way to be enrolled in a national census. This second king will rule over a non-violent kingdom of justice, love and peace. It is a kingdom that will last forever.

To further the contrast between these two kings, the first visitors to learn about the Holy Family are not civil dignitaries or important religious officials. Rather, they are shepherds, one of the most marginalized groups of their day. For the Orthodox Jew, shepherds were a source of ritual impurity—to be avoided at all costs. Yet here they are bowing down in adoration to worship and pay homage to this heavenly king.

From an objective point of view, a casual, uninformed visitor, standing among those shepherds that night would have seen a tranquil picture of a happy couple who, despite the humble conditions of their surroundings, were basking in the glow that always should accompany the gift of new life.

But, the shepherds saw things differently. Having been given a “heads-up” by the angelic choir, they saw with the eyes of faith that here was the wonder-Counselor, the God-hero, the father forever, the prince of peace foretold in Isaiah’s prophetic vision. With these eyes of faith, they knew that the event they were witnessing had eternal significance because they had been given a Divine insight into this virgin birth. They knew that what they saw and heard was of a consequence far beyond the ordinary miracle of new life. And I have to believe it must have changed their lives forever.

My dear friends, what about us? What do we see in the mysteries we experience in Word and sacrament tonight? Is the message of the Scriptures just a nice, traditional tale that can warm the inner chambers of our heart, little more than a pious story, or does this message contain a powerful challenge to bring about a real conversion of attitudes and behaviors? Are the Eucharistic mysteries in which we participate this night simply a symbolic gesture of God’s love for us and those in the pew beside us or do we recognize in these mysteries the transforming power wherein bread and wine are substantially changed so as, in turn, to change within us those dispositions which lead us away from self-centeredness and an attraction to sin? In other words, do we find ourselves standing before these mysteries with backs up straight, taking them in as a casual observer is wont to do? Or do we find ourselves bowing low before their meaning in recognition of just how far we have yet to go to achieve an integrated holiness?

Finally, do we fully grasp that what we see and hear are true? And are we open to their life-changing power?

Yes, that 4 foot tall, 4 foot wide entrance to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is a symbol of how one discovers the meaning that lies at the heart of this Christmas feast. For it forces us to bend low before the mystery of the God-made-flesh in a humble gesture that allows God to have control over our destiny and for us to admit our complete dependence on Him.

“O holy Child of Bethlehem!
 Descend to us, we pray;
 Cast out our sin and enter in,
 Be born in us today.
 We hear the Christmas angels
 The great glad tidings tell;
 O come to us, abide with us,
 Our Lord Immanuel.”

