

Christmas

December 25, 2006

Christmas touches what is most beautiful in our lives and in our faith. Christmas shows us that God wants to be close to us and wants us to be close to him. Christmas tells us God loves us enough that he is willing to share in our poverty and in our suffering. The place where he was born, Bethlehem, which means house of bread, and the manger in which he lay, which was a food trough for animals, reveal to us that he came to be our food, to nourish us with his truth and his light and his love. His birth shows us he came for all people, from the lowly shepherds who were practically the most unimportant people in society to the wise men who came from far away. Every child who is conceived is a sign of hope both to its parents and to the world – who knows what each little life might accomplish. Jesus' coming into our world brings with it the greatest hope of all, hope that we shall live forever in his kingdom.

Today I would like you to use your imagination. Picture what might happen if the statues in our crib were to come alive. What they might say. What they might do. What would Mary tell us? Would she complain of the long trip to Bethlehem bouncing along on the back of a donkey or the inconvenience of not finding a place to stay for the night? Or is it possible that none of that would matter because of the joy she felt at the birth of Jesus. Not only was he her precious child but the angel had told her he would be called holy, Son of God and king forever? Would she, in her love, be covering his little face with her kisses? And Joseph? He really cared about Mary and Jesus. Would he worry about them having to spend the night in a stable? But he was trusting, too, and he may have felt very peaceful knowing he did all he could and God would take care of the rest. What might the shepherds have to tell us? Were they amazed that God chose to tell them, as unimportant as they were,

this exciting news that their Messiah and Lord had just been born and he was only a few steps away from them? Did the wise men already see the star and start getting their bags packed so they could go to meet this newly arrived king? The animals, if they could talk, would probably ask, “What’s going on with all these people coming and going?” Could they sense the excitement around them and know that they were looking upon their God and Creator? I wonder what Jesus might have said if he could have talked, but he didn’t know how to talk yet. He was just born. The divine side of him might have been thinking why did I ever do this. Or his divine side, filled with divine joy from all eternity, might have been feeling joy now as a human infant, ready to bring life and light, healing and salvation to all who would be receptive to his great love. It’s interesting to speculate what each person in the stable might have been thinking, feeling, doing, or what they might say to us if they were to come alive.

I want to carry that thought just a little further. If these lifeless statues that remind us of the glorious event of Jesus’ birth were to come alive, that would be a stupendous miracle. It’s not in the nature of things that a lifeless object suddenly springs to life, and living things that have life do not suddenly take on a higher form of life. Seeds might turn into flowers and tadpoles might turn into frogs, but flowers don’t turn into cats and frogs don’t turn into whales. Trees do not become squirrels, goldfish do not become horses and rabbits do not become human. I have no quarrel with the idea of evolution if God decided to create higher and more complex forms of life from lower forms of life over thousands of years, but there is considerable consistency and stability in creation. And here is where part of the miracle of Christmas lies. The Son of God came down to us to lift us up, to give us a higher form of life, to make us humans divine. We do not stop being human, but we become much more, we become God’s sons and daughters. But we have to open

our hearts to him for this to happen. That's why we celebrate Christmas. It's not that the Son of God became bored up in heaven and decided he wanted something different to do, so he decided to come and visit this planet. No! He came to us because he wanted to share with us all the joy and love and life he shared with his Father and with the Holy Spirit from all eternity.

If Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were to say anything to us they would tell us to trust Jesus, to open our hearts to him and to follow his way of love, to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we do that, everything else will fall into place and we will enjoy eternal happiness. Amen

Feast of the Holy Family December 31, 2006

HOMILY: Psychologists have isolated about a dozen or so characteristics that happy and successful families share, while most unhappy families are unhappy or dysfunctional in their own unique and individual way. I want to talk about only one quality that helps marriages and families to be successful and happy and that is holiness since this is the feast of the Holy Family. This does not mean that holy families are isolated from the ordinary problems of daily life. Holy people have as many problems to deal with in daily life as anyone else, but they have a good support system to fall back on: God, who helps them deal with difficulties. The holy family had their share of problems. If you read the early chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke's gospels you might get the impression their lives were full of problems. Today's gospel is the only gospel that tells us anything about Jesus as he was growing up. What panic Joseph and Mary must have felt not being able to find him for three days. Every family has good and bad times.

The holy family was holy because God's will was first in their lives. And St. Luke wants us to know this. He pointed out many instances where Mary and

Joseph always did what God wanted of them, whether through the message of an angel or by their fidelity to the Jewish law. For example, Luke tells us in today's gospel the holy family would go to the Temple every year to celebrate the feast of Passover. That trip from Galilee to Jerusalem was not like taking a drive to Dayton or Lexington on a Sunday afternoon. Even though Jerusalem was only about 70 miles from Galilee, it would have taken a few days; most people had to travel on foot because they didn't have any other means of transportation and they had to travel in groups too, because travel was dangerous. They could have met robbers or wild animals along the way.

This willingness to do what God wants brings with it the development of many values such as honesty, fidelity, responsibility, and virtues such as Paul mentions in today's second reading: heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiving one another and putting up with one another and above all love which binds them all together and makes them perfect. These values and virtues help people have good relationships. When I say if we are a holy family our family will more likely be happy and successful, I'm not just making up things or proposing theories that I believe are good ideas. A number of statistical studies have shown that regular church goers live happier and more successful lives and have happier and more successful marriages. A few years ago the rate of divorce, for example, was twice as high among non-church goers as it was among church goers.

As we speak of families, I want to say a word about our parish family. Here I use the word family analogously. But I thought I would make some connection with family and parish because this Friday was the 15th anniversary of our merger with St. Patrick's and the 15th anniversary of my appointment to St. Boniface as pastor. Archdiocesan policy is that if a priest is over 65 years of age, he can stay where he is as long as he has the health and energy to do the job. I told the Archbishop I would like to stay here. I won't beat Monsignor Schwartz' record, but, God willing and with good health, I should be good until I'm 75 which will be another six years, then I'll see whether I should stay longer or whether I should retire. My hope is that someone else will step forward to take St. Joseph's Church at the end of June. It's been really hard trying to take care of two parishes. St. Boniface resembles a family in several ways. I feel like a father to so many, having

supported and guided many people through hard times throughout the years. Now that I have two parishes, I miss having as much time as I used to have for personal contact with our parishioners here. I enjoy praying at Mass with our parishioners and it pains me when I know people who should be here every week and who seldom are. I would like to hear more people praying and singing. St. Paul tells us, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." That's one thing I have to say about St. Joseph's Church. Their responses and singing are spirited. As "father" here in this family I am grateful for all the support I get, moral support, support when we need volunteers, and financial support. Just two weeks ago, for example, I put something in the bulletin about needing to do some repairs on the organ. I made no special pitch or appeal and already we received almost \$9,000. One of the things I find most refreshing here is that the people treat me as if I know something. Not that everyone thinks I'm always right, but in other places I've been it felt as if the people thought I didn't know anything and I was there **not** to be their spiritual leader, but to do whatever they wanted me to do. The only problem with that was everyone had conflicting ideas about what they wanted or what would be helpful to them. As your father, as your pastor, as your spiritual leader, I want to say I'm glad to be part of this spiritual family where I see genuine holiness and love.

Going back to my main theme of family, do you want to be a healthy family? If you can keep two rules uppermost in your family relationships (keep God first and love one another), you have most of the battle won.