

Feast of the Immaculate Conception - B Cycle
December 8, 2014

(Genesis 3,9-15.20; Ephesians 1,3-6.11-12; Luke 1,26-38)

Today's feast of the Immaculate Conception begins with a story about our first parents. They had been blessed with every blessing God could give them. That is what the Garden of Eden represents. Along with all these blessings, God gave them a Commandment not to eat the fruit of a certain tree and if they did, they would die. The devil showed up in the form of a serpent. The devil informed them that God gave them this command because God knew they would be just as great as God if they ate the fruit. So, our first parents decided that what God gave them was not good enough. They wanted to be as powerful as God. They didn't like God telling them what they could or couldn't do. They didn't want to have to obey God or depend on God. They wanted to be equal to God. So they ate the fruit they were not supposed to eat. Right away they knew they had done wrong. They began to feel shame and guilt. Then they began to put the blame on someone else for what they had done. Since there wasn't anyone else around whom they could blame, Adam blamed his wife and his wife blamed the devil. God told them they had been warned and now they and their children were going to lose many of the great blessings he had given them. They would also struggle with the tempter all their lives (talking to the serpent God said: "From now on you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies...") Yet in the end, God spoke a word of hope; i.e., the tempter will cause some harm to the children of Adam and Eve (God told the tempter: "you will strike at his heel") but, God said, he (the offspring of Adam and Eve) will eventually overcome the forces of evil for "he will crush the head" of the serpent. We who are the offspring of Adam and Eve continue to struggle against the evil one, and often we give in to the evil one, just as Adam and Eve did.

For many years God worked to prepare a way for evil to be defeated. He decided his Son would crush the head of the ancient serpent and destroy the power of the evil one. His Son would come to us in human form. When God was ready to send his Son, he decided that the mother of his Son would be totally free from any of the rebellion against God that somehow we inherited from our first parents. So God created Mary, free from sin, full of grace, for she would be the mother of God's Son. This is what the Immaculate Conception means. It is the feast we are celebrating. Mary, from the very first moment of her life, was free from sin. But it wasn't just for a short time that Mary was without sin. Mary lived her whole life, always ready to say "yes" to God in anything that God might ask of her. This was implied in the greeting the angel Gabriel used when he came to Mary. The angel said "Hail, full of grace!" Mary was very perplexed, but then Gabriel told her what God wanted her to do, "you will bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High..." Gabriel waited for her answer and, of course, like everything else in her life, her answer was "yes." "I am the servant of the Lord." Actually the word she used was "slave." She belonged to God and she would serve him in any manner he wished.

St. Paul sums up this beautiful feast in his letter to the Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him.” God is blessed for having blessed us with every spiritual blessing so that we might be holy. The same gift of holiness that God gave Mary when he created her, he gives to us when we are baptized. I know we sometimes imitate Adam and Eve in deciding we don’t like God telling us what to do, but let us pray that we might imitate Mary more, so we can enjoy God’s spiritual blessings in heaven, forever. Amen.

2nd Sunday of Advent - B Cycle

December 7, 2014

INTRODUCTION - (*Isaiah 40, 1-5.9-11; II Peter 3, 8-14; Mark 1, 1-8*) When the Jews were conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BC, the ones who were not killed were taken to Babylon as slaves 1,000 miles away from their homeland. In spite of their sins, God promised not to abandon them; he assured them, through the prophets, that he would restore them to their homes and their lands. Roughly fifty years later the Babylonians were conquered and destroyed by the Persians (people who lived in Iran). The king of Persia, Cyrus, immediately gave the Jews permission to return to their land. Today’s reading from Isaiah begins a large 16-chapter section of Isaiah known as the “Book of Consolation.” The prophet is instructed by God to bring this good news of liberation to God’s people. The route by which the Lord would lead his people home is referred to as “the way of the Lord.” The prophet proclaims that attention must be given to preparing that way. This is the important theme in today’s liturgy. John the Baptist takes up this theme five centuries later when he calls the people of his own day to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, of the House of David. The liturgy uses today’s Scriptures to call us to prepare not only for one day, Christmas, but also for the various ways in which Christ comes to us in our daily lives as well as for the day when Christ will call us into his eternal kingdom.

HOMILY Mark is the shortest of the gospels. He begins his gospel by informing us that we are going to hear about the good news of Jesus Christ; he doesn’t start with the story of Jesus’ birth as Matthew and Luke do, nor does he take us back before time began as John does. He gets right to the point and tells us we need to prepare to hear the good news of the gospel so that our hearts are open to God’s Word. It is through John the Baptist that Mark tells us to prepare.

So much of our life is spent in preparation for one thing or another. God and nature began to prepare us for life in this world from the moment of conception. As we grew, we were taught how to adequately prepare ourselves for various events. I remember getting ready for school the first day and getting ready for my first Communion. I remember in the third grade having to move from Northside to Price Hill and all that was involved in getting ready to move. There were preparations for going to Elder as I

graduated from St. Lawrence, preparations for entering the seminary, which was the first time in my life I was ever away from home. Preparing for ordination involved nine years of study and especially lots of activity during the last year before ordination. I thought I was well prepared to work in a parish and teach school. Little did I know how little I knew when I started and how many more ways I would have to prepare myself for the ministry I felt called to. I remember preparing to go to Israel for three months with only one suitcase and a carry-on bag. It was a lot of anxiety trying to make sure I wasn't forgetting something. Then there are the many routine things that require preparation such as holidays, family gatherings, preaching a homily every week, etc.

You're probably saying I don't need to hear all that, but I'm sure you could resonate with me how making preparations for something is such a big part of anyone's life. Think what an embarrassment or even a disaster we run into when we are caught unprepared. I remember sweating bullets as I sat in front of my theology professor during an oral exam. I can't remember if I studied the wrong material or my mind just shut down, but the result was not pretty. The prophet says prepare, John the Baptist says prepare, our advent season says prepare. For 1400 years, the Church has been celebrating this period of preparation. We are about to celebrate the greatest event in the history of the world; the Son of God has taken on our own human nature in order to reveal his love to us, in order to heal us, to teach us, to free us from sin and shame and to share with us everlasting life. If that's not important enough to prepare for, what is?

How can we prepare? Perhaps we need to change some habits or attitudes that conflict with Jesus' teachings. Perhaps we could read the gospel for the day, picture it, think about it for several minutes. Sometimes we can experience the Lord speaking to us in a powerful way through his Word. Or we could say the rosary during the week, or come to morning Mass or Holy Hour on Wednesday morning or Friday afternoon, or do some spiritual reading. There is no limit to the hundreds of kind things we can do for another person. Sometimes our preparations are not a matter of doing something more, but of doing something less (such as watching TV) so that we can have some quiet time to be with God. There's no substitute for quiet time. The spiritual and emotional benefits of quiet time are abundant. Don't just prepare for Christmas, prepare for Christ. Amen.

3rd Sunday of Advent - B Cycle

December 14, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 61, 1-2a. 10-11; I Thessalonians 5, 16-24; John 1, 6-8. 19-28*)

As the celebration of Christ's birth draws near, the mood of our liturgy becomes more joyful. It's still Advent though, so we're not yet singing Christmas carols at Mass. We are preparing and waiting and praying for God to help us open our minds and hearts to the great miracle of his birth. Isaiah, in today's first reading, sees the day when God's kingdom would bring peace and justice to those who suffer and he rejoices as he sees this coming to be. St. Luke tells us Jesus used these very words of the prophet Isaiah to describe what his ministry would be about as he gave his first homily. The

responsorial psalm is almost always from the Book of Psalms, but today it is Mary's hymn of joy - called the Magnificat. It is a hymn of praise which she enthusiastically proclaimed when she visited her cousin Elizabeth after accepting God's invitation for her to be the mother of our Savior. St. Paul, in today's second reading, tells us to rejoice always. Linked with this he says that we should pray without ceasing. He also adds we should give thanks in all circumstances - all of which draws a connection between joy and prayer and gratitude.

HOMILY: Joy fills our hearts as we reflect on the mystery of our God and creator coming to us in human form. He comes to assure us of his infinite love for us and his desire to share that love with us for all eternity. When we come to today's gospel, however, the theme of joy seems to have disappeared. Although he leaped with joy in his mother's womb when Mary came to visit his mother, Elizabeth, what we know of John as an adult was that he was a very austere person and a fire and brimstone preacher. So I struggled a little to find any reference to joy in the gospel. I read that John preached we must make straight the way of the Lord. That is, of course, the way to true joy, to walk the road that God has shown to us. I would like to share with you another connection I think there is between John the Baptist and joy.

John knew who he was. Not knowing who we are and what our purpose is will prevent us from knowing joy. A lot of people thought maybe the Baptist was the Messiah. John clearly denied it. Nor was he the prophet promised to Moses; nor was he the prophet Elijah who the people were expecting to return from heaven – although he did fulfill their expectations by taking on the role and the life style of Elijah. John was just a voice crying out in the desert. He knew that about himself. He knew that he was not even worthy to untie the sandals of the One to come after him. It is questionable as to whether even slaves were required to do that for their master.

At Delphi in Greece, there once stood a temple to the Greek god Apollo. Only the ruins remain now. On one of the stones of that temple are carved the words "Know thyself." These two words have been interpreted in various ways throughout the centuries. They may have had a specific meaning for the Greek worshippers of Apollo, but I want to assure you they are an important message for those who want to grow spiritually. I have been listening to a series of lectures on St. Teresa's Interior Castle and this is one of the basic teachings of Teresa. We have to know ourselves if we are going to make progress in the spiritual life. We have to know our emotions, our dreams, our strengths and our weaknesses. Knowing ourselves honestly for who we are is true humility. When we make ourselves more than what we are, it is the sin of pride. However, when we are honestly aware of our good points, that is pride too, but it is a healthy form of pride. When we make ourselves less than what we are we are being dishonest and diminishing the gifts and abilities and wonder of the good things God has given us. A lot of people think humility is a matter of putting ourselves down. Low self-esteem is not humility. Humility is honest self-esteem. And if we could see ourselves in the light of God's great love, we would be absolutely astounded how much we are loved.

A person who is not humble is not likely to be joyful because they are constantly demeaning themselves or they are constantly working to maintain an image that they are something other than they really are. The next question is “how do we attain this honest self-knowledge?” The answer is meditation. It is a journey toward self-knowledge. This self-knowledge will lead us to a more honest knowledge of God for God lives within us. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which you have within you and that you are not your own?” (I Cor. 6,19)

Joy is the product of a life lived close to God. For joy, look into your own heart; if you find in your heart such sentiments as gratitude, thoughtfulness and kindness, love, a positive attitude, trust in God and awareness of God’s love, then joy should soon be growing there. We can get too absorbed in material things at this time of the year and miss the joy that God wants us to have, joy that results from his blessings to us and our responding to him. If you want to reflect a bit more on joy, read today’s second reading again. Paul sums it up very well. Amen.

Deacon Jerry preached the Fourth Sunday in Advent.

Christmas
December 25, 2014

Last Friday I visited the 8th grade in our school. We talked about many things, mostly Christmas, of course. I started off with a few jokes, like:

What did Adam say on the day before Christmas? “It’s Christmas, Eve!” (some liked it!)

Here’s another: a child writes in response to a letter from Santa: “Dear Santa, Sorry for what I did in the past, and thank you for the Christmas letter – I love it. But what I really want for Christmas is \$53 billion dollars.” (Who said children don’t know the value of money?)

One more. A man wrapped his Christmas presents in early November and when he had finished he realized he had used the wrong wrapping paper. The paper he used had *Happy Birthday* written on it. Rather than waste the paper, he wrote *Jesus* on it after the words *Happy Birthday*. Now that gets us to what we’re here for.

One child wanted to know if December 25 was the actual day on which Jesus was born. My answer was no one knows exactly on what day Jesus was born, but we do know he lived. we need to celebrate Jesus birth because this is one of the two greatest things that has happened in the history of our world (the other great thing is Jesus’ resurrection). Even though we do not know the exact date, the event that happened has to be celebrated because if we don’t celebrate it we will forget it. So, I tried to get them to think how great a thing Jesus’ birth is. Our God, the creator of the universe, who is infinitely greater and more powerful than we can imagine, came to us and took on our human nature. He became like us in all things except sin. He had no sin

because he always loved his heavenly father and didn't want to displease him. He got hungry and thirsty and tired. He needed to be fed when he was an infant. Perhaps he hurt himself playing games; maybe some other kids bullied him. He needed to learn how to walk and talk and to obey his parents. He had to learn how to pray and to go to Synagogue on the Sabbath. He was God even when he was a little baby. So I asked, now, isn't his coming to us and becoming human worth celebrating? One boy said, if that's so great why don't we celebrate it every day. I would like to think that he wasn't just thinking of getting presents or having a break from school every day when he asked that question but that he was impressed with the awesome mystery of God's coming to us. I was pleased to hear a couple of children answer that we celebrate this mystery every week when we come to Mass. I added with Mass daily it's possible to celebrate God's coming to us every day. But at least for one day, we put other things aside so we can focus more intently on this mystery and on the love of God that it shows us. We can't forget about the reason why Christ came to us because he loves us more than we can ever know. The great mystery of his coming and of his love is repeated again and again in the Mass.

We all know we live in a world where there is so much pain and sorrow, so much fighting and hatred and crime. Jesus came to tell us there is a better way. He showed us that way by showing us how he loved others, the poor, the stranger, those suffering and all of us sinners. Even in sickness and sadness, he would show us the way to hope and to an eternal dwelling where we will find joy with him forever. He told us the way we could find that eternal dwelling when he told us he is the way and the truth and the life.

In the sacrament of the Eucharist we are celebrating, he comes to us again and shows us his love. Some people have problems believing in the Eucharist. If we can believe that God can come to us as human, why do people have difficulty believing God can come to us in the form of bread and wine. I often think that for the God of our universe to become human, he had to reach an infinite distance below his own greatness to do so. If he could do that, it was just a tiny little reach further for him to take on the form of bread and wine. And so we celebrate God's coming and his infinite love which we hope to be able to celebrate forever. Amen.

Deacon Jerry preached for the Feast of the Holy Family.