

The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Mass during the Night [14] Isaiah 9:1-6 / Psalm 96 / 2 Timothy 2:11-14 / Luke 2:1-14

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the ancient promise fulfilled. The Emmanuel prophecies emphasize that their bondage and the burden they carry will be lifted by the coming Messiah. He makes reference to the familiar analogy between light and darkness. Originally it signified the liberation of northern Israel from the Assyrians. But it comes to have a deeper meaning. The Gospel will speak about the Light of Christ that would dispel the darkness of ignorance and seeming abandonment. God will remember his people. Their sorrow will be transmuted into joy.

His words speak to a profound peace that will not be fully realized until the second coming and the consummation of all things. The prophet seems aware that God will come to save his people. The long-awaited Messiah is called “Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, and Prince of Peace.”

The theme of Christ’s two-tiered crown comes to the fore. The Lord will combine the heavenly kingdom with the earthly throne of David. It will be an ever-lasting kingdom sustained “by judgment and justice.” This means that all wrongs will be made right. The innocent will be exonerated and the guilty will be punished. Indeed, the response to Job’s cry to heaven will finally be fully heard. We are not abandoned or orphaned. God does indeed hear the cry of the poor. Nothing escapes God. No deception will remain hidden. Truth will be exposed.

The responsorial would have us announce the principal message of Christmas, what slogans promote as the reason for the season: “Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord!” The psalm verses emphasize how his coming changes everything. All of creation exults in her king. All peoples are summoned to acknowledge him and his sovereignty. The incarnation serves two purposes. Foremost, knowing the later chapters of the Gospel story, we suffer no timidity in making the bluntest of spoilers: this baby Jesus is Lord and Christ and Savior! Further, his incarnation into the human family serves the purpose of joining the Creator with his creation!

As we acknowledge the first coming of Christ, our reading from Timothy reminds us that we are still awaiting the second. During this time of grace, we are beckoned to answer the universal call to salvation and to imitate the holiness of Christ. He came to forgive sin and to redeem us as his own. If we belong to him then our words and lives should show it.

The Gospel reading from Luke transports us to the census decreed by Caesar Augustus. The Holy Family travels to Bethlehem, a word that means “House of Bread.” It is the home town of Joseph, the foster father of Christ. We are told that it was a “city of David.” The Jews tended to marry within their tribes or clan. Thus, we can readily assume that Mary was a daughter from

the Davidic line. The Christmas story is familiar to us. Mary gave birth to her firstborn son. The expression “firstborn” did not imply there would be other children; rather it was an expression or idiom for the first child to open the womb. He is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Note the incredible synchronicity: Bethlehem means “House of Bread” and Jesus will make himself the Bread of Life; the Christ Child is placed in a manger or feed box for animals and Jesus will make himself the Eucharistic food for men and women; and while they must suffer a barn or cave because there is no room in the inn, God in Jesus Christ came down to earth to make room for us in heaven. The church has a depiction of the nativity scene and yet the true manger is the altar where we encounter our saving Lord.

An angel tells the shepherds the Good News and urges them, “Do not be afraid.” It is the same command that Christ gave his apostles after his resurrection. Neither should we be afraid at the Lord’s coming. We should echo the angels in praising God. The shepherds signified a poor and a waiting people, measured as insignificant by the world. God keeps his promises. He hears the cry of the poor. The Savior comes first to the simple and to the outcasts. He does so as one of them. He will be the great shepherd for souls. There was no room in the inn. As a man, he told us that the Son of Man had nowhere to rest his head. He ministers to the poor, to the hurting, to the oppressed and to sinners. If we want to be counted with Christ, then we must cast our lot with him and acknowledge our utter dependence upon him. We come to Jesus so that we might encounter him and his saving mission— we come to the Christ so that we might measure him as our one great treasure and gift from heaven— we come to him so that we might know mercy and salvation— we come to him so that we might join the angels in giving him praise and adoration.

To us is born the King.

The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Vigil Mass [13] Isaiah 62:1-5 / Psalm 89 / Acts 13:16-17, 22-25 / Matthew 1:1-25

The readings give us a certain sense of movement through time. There is a progressive revelation in history by which God shows his face and intervenes in human affairs. All the ancient prophets until the coming of John the Baptist constitute an effort to prepare a people for the Lord. The Jews were regarded as a vanquished people. Their nation was no more. The temple was destroyed. The people were sent into exile. It was probably a miracle that they were able to sustain their sense of identity and their trust in God. The prophet Isaiah swears that he will not remain silent, even though his message opens him up to ridicule. Brought low, one day the world will see Jerusalem's vindication. While he speaks of the Jewish nation, his words have a greater importance in regards to faith. The Babylonian Exile would see the transition of Judaism from a nation to a religion. The coming of the Christ further spiritualizes their faith; indeed it would transform it into something greater than before. The torch would be passed. Both Judaism and Catholicism constitute true religion. The Hebrew Messiah would show himself as Savior and Christ for the entire world. Salvation comes from the Jews. God's people would no longer be called "Forsaken" or "Desolate." Rather, the Church is adorned as the "Espoused" or Bride of Christ. The New Zion or New Jerusalem is called by a new name, the CHURCH. She is the unblemished bride to the groom Christ. Every Mass is an earthly participation in the heavenly marriage banquet.

The responsorial emphasizes that God is always the one who initiates a covenant with his people. There are several in the Old Testament: with Noah, with Abraham and particularly with Moses. They are called out from among the other tribes. God gives them his law and says that if they are obedient unto him then he will be their God and they will be his people. Jesus establishes the definitive covenant at the Last Supper where he declares himself the eternal Lamb of God. The sacrifice that seals the covenant is in his body and blood. This is the New Covenant of the Christian dispensation.

We find Paul in the second reading preaching something of the Jewish legacy and history of salvation. They were led by Moses out of Egyptian bondage. Wanting a king like other nations, they were ruled by Saul and later by David. The long-awaited Messiah would come from David's line. John was the prophet who prepared and announced his coming in Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Matthew gives us a genealogy of Jesus Christ. Every name mentioned recalls a story in their long history as a people. It serves a purpose for Jesus similar to that of the Litany of the Saints for the Church. Salvation history continues in our stories and in how they intersect that of Christ. Matthew's genealogy extends from Abraham in a pattern of three series of fourteen members. The first are the patriarchs. The second are the royalty. The third are the

ordinary holy men and women. The structure is a theological construct, and not a literal listing. Many names are omitted.

At the end of the genealogy we have the start of the familiar Christmas story. There are some important points that we should take away from it.

(1) Betrothal constituted the first tier of Jewish marriage. Mary was in no sense an unwed mother. The second tier or stage was when the husband took the woman into his house. Tradition has it that Mary planned to live her life as a virgin handmaid of the temple. Such women would usually seek the first tier of marriage with an older man, preferably a widower, so that they would be free to serve and to do so with the protection of a legal spouse or father figure. Remember this was a time when women were sometimes treated as property and could be forced into marriages.

(2) Mary's plans change when she receives her singular calling from the Angel Gabriel and she conceives the Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

(3) Joseph, a righteous man, had planned to divorce her quietly, thus freeing her from their bond, allowing her to pursue any love interest and to protect her from stoning under strict Jewish laws against adultery. He was no doubt deeply pained and perplexed, knowing what kind of girl she was. An angel comes to him in a dream and urges him not to be afraid to take her into his home. He does so and thus fully claims the mother and child as his own. He is righteous because he knows and follows the Jewish law. He is righteous because he stands in right relationship with God. Like Mary he may not always understand, but he believes and accepts.

(4) Just as Zachariah follows an angelic dictate to call his child, John; Joseph is told to name Mary's child, JESUS. The word Jesus means Savior or God Saves. The angel tells Joseph that Jesus will save his people from their sins. Making it clear that this is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, there is the quotation: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

(5) The final line in the Gospel is often misinterpreted: "He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus." Jewish expressions often give the wrong impression in translation. This line does not mean that Mary and Joseph ever engaged in marital relations. Joseph still saw her as the temple virgin; although now the temple was not a building but Jesus Christ. He would continue as their protector and the foster father of Christ, but nothing more. She would remain the ever-virgin Mother of God. The emphasis in this line is simply to make it abundantly clear that Jesus was supernaturally conceived and not by human congress. He was God come down from heaven to save his people. That is the essential theme for the Christmas celebration.

The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Mass during the Day [16] Isaiah 52:7-10 / Psalm 98 / Hebrews 1:1-6 / John 1:1-18

The history of God's people as a nation began with a theocracy where God led his people through intermediaries, the prophets. But the Hebrews wanted a human king like the other nations and God relented. The coming of Christ signals not only a restoration of the earthly Davidic kingship, but also advances once again the gravity of God's reign. God comes to save his people in Jesus Christ. The prophecy is fulfilled. Salvation is announced and the new Zion proclaims that "Your God is King!" Jerusalem will not only be redeemed but remade as the Church or New Zion. This redemption points to an important Catholic mystery of faith. God's people are summoned to both a personal and a communal faith.

The psalm brings to the fore the message that God's saving power cannot be limited to the House of Israel. We repeat again and again, "All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God." The later coming of the Magi will illustrate this truth. The shepherds signified the Jewish people. The wise men represented the Gentiles. The entire world would bend the knee to the new born king. His dominion would be everlasting and universal.

The Pauline author of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives us an eloquent depiction of Christ as the eminent Son and high priest. Now God will not simply speak to us through prophets but with his own lips. This is the hallmark of the incarnation. Jesus is a member of the human family but is also God's Son, a divine Person. We could not save ourselves, only God could save us. He does so as one of us.

Why did Jesus enter our world? He came so that sins might be forgiven. He came that the breach between heaven and earth might be healed. He came to pay a price that we owed and could not pay, redeeming us from the devil. He came to claim us as his own and then to take his seat at the "right hand of the Majesty on high." This element joins his first coming with the second. Jesus Christ will consummate all things in himself. He is the one Mediator to the heavenly Father and Lord. He is the one high priest who sacrifices himself to pay the ancient debt where we dishonored God in Adam and Eve. All ordained priests participate in his one high priesthood. He is born into our world so that we might be reborn into his kingdom. He suffers that we might be healed. He dies so that we might have a share in eternal life.

We are told that he is "far superior to the angels." The epistle states: "And again, when he leads the firstborn into the world, he says: Let all the angels of God worship him." Some of the Church fathers speculated that it was this truth that made Lucifer rebel with a third of the angelic hosts. Satan refused to bend the knee at the crèche. His pride would not allow him to acknowledge that the Most High would clothe himself in weak human flesh. Thus, he

contemptuously sought to corrupt what God had made and to mock his plan to join himself to his creation.

God sustains creation from moment to moment. God enters creation and begins to live in time and space. Humanity, even with its faults is held in high regard by God. We read in the epistle, “For to which of the angels did God ever say: You are my son; this day I have begotten you? Or again: I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me?”

John gives us the start of the Christmas story by focusing first on the living Word prior to the incarnation. We write our words upon paper. God would first write his one Word upon human flesh. The Second Person of the Trinity is the one through whom all things came to be.

The Light of God was entering the world to dispel the darkness of suffering, sin and death. John the Baptist testified to this Light. The Gospel states that this is “the true light, which enlightens everyone.” There is a play of words against the false light, often personalized by the name Lucifer given the devil. There are only two figures called LIGHT in the Scriptures. One is the devil or Lucifer who is a false light. He would lead us astray, distracting us with proximate or limited goods. The other is Jesus who is the LIGHT OF THE WORLD, the true Light that allows us to see the truth and to feel the warmth of divine love, even as we journey through the darkness of the cold world.

John’s Gospel gives a quick summary of the Christ-story. Our Lord enters the world. The Word takes human flesh. He is rejected by his own. But he is accepted by a few and by a new people. He transforms those who come to him into spiritual sons and daughters of the Father, inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. Those who believe in JESUS and in his saving name can be reborn or transformed by him. God becomes human so that by grace men and women might be divinized.