

“Making Room for God at the Inn of Our Heart”

Homily for Christmas, Mass During the Night Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption December 24, 2018

Introduction

These weeks around Christmas and the other holy days at this time of the year are filled with many beloved cultural and spiritual traditions from different cultural groups around the world. We are blessed in San Francisco to have many of these available to us, given the great ethnic diversity that marks the Bay Area. Many of these traditions have the aim of being a sort of pilgrimage that, over a period of several days, prepares us to celebrate our Lord’s birth at Christmas, such as the Posada custom in the Mexican culture.

This is the re-enactment of the Holy Family seeking lodging, “posada,” when the moment for the Christ child to be born has arrived. In this beloved tradition, one group of pilgrims walks from house to house singing, and when they arrive, sing back and forth to the people on the inside who respond that they have no room. Finally, at the last house, which takes the pilgrims in, the hosts sing: “Enter, holy pilgrims, receive this little corner; although the dwelling is poor, I give it to you with all my heart.”

Instruction in Right Living

The story of Mary and Joseph finding themselves homeless when their child is born is one of the most cherished elements in our Christmas traditions; among other things, it inspired St. Francis to invent the Nativity Scene, which represents the historical fact of our Lord’s birth. And yet, this is all based on one sentence in the Bible, which we just heard from the Gospel of St. Luke: “She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” One sentence, but it reveals to us a defining moment in human history.

The appearance of this child is, as St. Paul tells us in his letter to Titus, the appearance of grace: “The grace of God has appeared, saving all.” And just what is this grace? St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us that grace implies mercy, for, as he says, “grace is of that which is freely granted, and what is freely granted is conferred out of mercy.” It is out of His mercy that God has appeared to us, and this is the irony: God who has shown this great act of mercy that cannot be reciprocated on our part was greeted with no mercy at all when He appeared in this world. We do well, then, to pay heed as to what He did for us when He came into this world and walked and ministered among us.

As St. Paul goes on to say, He came to give us instruction in right living, which is accomplished to two complementary ways: “to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age,” and, “Jesus Christ ... gave himself for us ... to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.”

Rejecting godless ways and worldly desires, and living temperately, justly and devoutly means being rightly ordered within oneself: morally upright, centered in God, following His commandments – in a word, a life imbued with human and Christian virtue. To be eager to do what is good is, literally from the biblical text, to be zealous for good works. Good works orient us to being other-centered. This is a life imbued with human and Christian charity: serving the

poor, caring for the needy, coming to the aid of those in distress, but doing so cognizant of the fact that this is how Jesus continues to appear to us here and now in our world.

This points to the fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah we heard in our first reading: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” By appearing in our world, God has taught us the right way to live that will lead to our ultimate happiness, and by dying on the Cross for us He has opened for us the floodgates of grace to enable us to live accordingly.

Self-Emptying

To do that, though, we must give from the heart. “Although the dwelling is poor, I give it to you with all my heart.” That poor dwelling *is* our heart: the human heart is the inn where God is looking to lodge. But God cannot lodge in a heart that is already packed full; in such an inn, there is no room. We must, then, empty our heart – of selfishness, of greed, of obsession with self-indulgence and self-absorption, so that there will be room for God to make His home.

In so doing, we will be repeating the pattern that our Lord Himself has set for us. That is, He teaches not only with words, but above all by example. He was the one who took the initiative by emptying Himself of His claim to divinity, and coming to earth to be born in feeble human flesh, in a poor, homeless family. This is what St. Paul tells us in his Letter to the Philippians:

[T]hough he was in the form of God, [Christ Jesus] did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Our society is afflicted with so many terrible problems, of all kinds. Certainly, sufficient resources and creative solutions are necessary, but, ultimately, it is a spiritual problem. There are always dire consequences for individuals and for society as a whole when God finds no room at the inn of the human heart.

Mary and Joseph were homeless when God’s Son was born. This is certainly one of those social ills that strikes very close to home here in San Francisco, where it has been a chronic problem for years, and continues to be. And it strikes close to home in a quite literal sense: a cathedral is the spiritual home of God’s people. Close to one-hundred homeless men are sleeping directly below us at this moment in the Cathedral event center while we are here in this church worshipping. We are taking our turn in a roving cold-winter shelter in which various faith communities in this part of the city participate, each one taking its turn to host these neighbors of ours for several weeks at a time. This, really, is a perfect symbol of the rightly-ordered life in which God came to earth to instruct us: centered in Him, with our identity consisting in being His people, we reject godless ways and worldly desires and so are cleansed by Him to be a people zealous for good works.

Wondrous Exchange

By repeating that pattern of our Lord's self-emptying, we walk out of darkness into His own wonderful light. Those worldly desires, though, continue to drag us in the opposite direction. Just the other day I heard a story on the radio about a classroom of children being taught the value of trade. Each child was given some candy upon entering the classroom; there were different varieties of candy, but each child was given all the same variety. They were then encouraged to trade with others, and as a result, each child ended up with a variety of different kinds of candy. This meant – as the story explained – that each child ended up happier after the trade than before. However, while this provides a helpful lesson in economics, it is absolutely the wrong message for teaching how one finds true happiness in life. The message here is that happiness is found in possessing. This even contradicts basic human experience: how often it happens that people find themselves with an abundance of material goods but feeling miserable. In our affluent society depression is epidemic! Happiness comes not from possessing but from giving. It's good those children learned a lesson about how trade works and improves people's lot in life, but the real happiness would consist in making their classmates happy by the trade they made.

On other hand, though, in a certain sense the eternal fulfillment of our human vocation does consist in a trade. It is what the Church for centuries has referred to with the theological term, *admirabile commercium*, that is, a wondrous exchange. Already at this moment, at the birth of this child, we see anticipated the purpose for which this child came into the world: to die on the Cross for us. Good Friday and Easter Sunday already lay hidden within the mystery of Christmas. This wondrous exchange is announced on Holy Saturday night in the Easter Proclamation at the beginning of the Easter Vigil service: "O wonder of your humble care for us! O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave you gave away your Son!" In this trade, God freely chooses to give us the better end of the deal, by far! The point for us is *not* to fall back into slavery by succumbing to those godless, worldly desires that keep tugging at us, luring us into a disordered life of self-centeredness.

Conclusion

God has appeared in our world; although there was no room for Him at the inn, He graced us with His presence, and instructed us in living temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age; and He cleansed us by His death so that we might be zealous for good works. What a joy for us so to live, to empty ourselves of ourselves, so that we might make room for Him in the inn of our heart. Then, when He comes again to seek lodging, we can exclaim in welcome: "Enter, dear Lord Jesus, receive this little corner; although the dwelling is poor, I give it to you with all my heart."