

“O Little Town of Bethlehem, O Saving City of David”
Homily for Christmas Midnight Mass, 2019
St. Mary’s Cathedral

Introduction

“O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.” The words of the beloved Christmas carol are well known to us, and we sing it fondly at this time of the year, as we do so many other cherished Christmas carols. It is St. Luke’s account of the birth of the Lord, of course, that inspired this Christmas carol, the story we hear recounted in the Gospel for this Christmas Mass During the Night.

Bethlehem, City of David

But why Bethlehem? Yes, it is a little town. It had once been prominent, but by the time our Lord was born it was small and insignificant. It is yet another sign of the way God works in unfolding His plan for our eternal salvation: always choosing what is meek and lowly to accomplish His great acts of salvation. But there is more to it than this. Bethlehem is the city where David was born, and the place where Samuel anointed him king. And the Messiah was to come from the house – that is, the lineage – of David. But, why David?

David certainly had his defects. In some ways, he was even a flawed individual. He was a fierce warrior, and sometimes ruthless and deceitful. He was guilty of adultery and murder, certainly among the most serious of sins. But he also had his virtues: he was faithful in friendship; he was respectful of his predecessor King Saul, even though Saul was envious and was trying to kill him, and yet David did not even take Saul’s life when he had the opportunity; he showed respect for the lives of his soldiers; he was honest with himself and repentant when he had done wrong; he was forgiving; he had great reverence for the Ark of the Covenant; he was a poet, writing hymns in praise of God, which have come down to us today as the Psalms of David.

As a warrior, he seized Jerusalem and made it the capital of his people, uniting all twelve tribes of Israel into one kingdom. It was the golden age of Israel: she was at her peak of power and prosperity, having vanquished her enemies under the leadership of David, with Egypt to the south waning and Assyria to the east not yet rising to the powerful place it would later occupy in the ancient Near East.

There is something more, though, that sets David apart from all of the other kings of Israel: his unwavering fidelity and loyalty to the Lord, the God of Israel. Ancient Israel always felt the pull tugging her back to the idol worship of all of her pagan neighbors; the people easily buckled under this cultural and political pressure, turning their backs on the one true God Who revealed Himself to them and made a Covenant with them. Even the kings were not unaffected. All of them faltered, and some terribly so, even to the point of leading their people into idol worship with them. All of them except David: he always and only worshiped the one true God of Israel. He never committed the sin of idolatry.

King David, then, has become synonymous with purity of worship. When under later kings the kingdom became divided and eventually was conquered and destroyed, the prophets proclaimed that God would send a new king who would reunite the people and restore their splendor beyond anything they had ever known. And so we hear the story of the fulfillment of that promise tonight, as the angel announced to the shepherds: “today in the city of David [that is, Bethlehem] a savior has been born for you who is Christ the Lord.”

Silence

He is a savior, the invisible God made visible to us, God turned towards us and not remaining aloof from us. He *is* his name, Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” God is present to us, and His very presence is our salvation. How, though, does that make a real difference in our lives?

Two verses later in the beloved Christmas carol we sing, “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.” The answer is: through silence. Does that not bring to mind perhaps the most popular and beloved Christmas carol of all, Silent Night? A mysterious, expectant silence comes over the earth tonight. Perhaps we are living in a world that has forgotten God because we live in a world that can no longer tolerate silence. But it is silence that makes room for God, and so keeps us focused on worship of the one true God, and not of the many contemporary idols that are vying for our loyalty. It is in cultivating silence, the spirit of prayer, that we escape the banality and rat race of this world, and, in the words of the Preface for this Christmas Mass, “we [can] recognize in Christ God made visible, [so that] we may be caught up through him in love of things invisible.”

House of Bread

It is through this purity of worship, unwavering fidelity to the true God, that we are given the gift to see with the eyes of faith, to recognize and understand the mysteries before us. It is no accident that God chose Bethlehem to be the city of David, the city from which would come our Messiah and Savior. Not just because it was small and insignificant at the time he was born. There were certainly many other such towns at that time. But the word Bethlehem means, literally, “house of bread.” The Savior continues to make himself present to us on the altar, under the signs of bread and wine in the holy Eucharist. Only with the eyes of faith can we understand that this truly becomes his body, blood, soul and divinity, in accordance with his promise to us, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6:56).

Who were the first ones to recognize that this little child was more than a child, the first to adore this child as the God-made-man? Not the powerful, wealthy or cultural elites, but those who were considered the very dregs of society: poor, ignorant shepherds. They had the eyes of faith, because with purity of worship they were able to receive and understand the message of the angel. And what else did the angel proclaim, along with the “multitude of the heavenly host”? “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Peace. The greeting that accompanies the announcement of the birth of the Savior is the same greeting with which the Savior would greet his apostles after his Resurrection: peace. His peace comes from his risen, glorified presence among us, the peace that flows from the altar through the holy Eucharist, the sacrament of God turned towards us.

Conclusion

The eyes of faith understand something even more to the Christmas story. It is no coincidence that ancient Israel reached her golden era in the temporal order of her history at the very time they were ruled by the king who was always rightly ordered in his worship of the God Who made the Covenant with them. We so deeply desire peace and prosperity, yet without a proper spiritual vision we see these as merely the absence of conflict and material well-being,

rather than being in a right, harmonious relationship with God and neighbor, and responding fully and faithfully to the vocation God has given us. God is present to us, but only when we are present to God, worshiping Him and Him alone, cultivating silence in our heart through prayer, will our hearts be open to the blessings of His Heaven which He wishes to impart to us. These blessings are a love that is way beyond anything this world has to offer. And so in the beloved Christmas carol about Bethlehem, we conclude in the final verse with the words:

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 with great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!