

## 9PM Christmas Eve Mass 2019

Every Mass on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day is special and has unique meaning. In fact, the Missal includes the option to use different readings and prayers for the first Mass of Christmas Eve in the evening (the Mass we are having now, which is the Mass at Night of Christmas Eve), the Christmas Day Mass at Dawn, and the Christmas Day Mass during the Day. When I was younger, I took all of that on. Now that I am in my 60s, the option of using the same readings at the Christmas Masses is OK with me.

Nevertheless, more than any other celebration, Christians gather at Christmas during the different stages of light in darkness – the early evening, late at night, early in the morning and during full day. The experience of winter in the Northern Hemisphere – of the world turning toward the deepest time of darkness, and then beginning to make the slow journey back to the light – speaks to the mystery of Christ's birth. Jesus Christ, the light of all nations, is born "when half-spent was the night." No matter what readings we use, the various Christmas liturgies and their interplay with the light and darkness of this time of year create a powerful way for us to reflect on our spiritual journey, our continual struggle between moving away from the light of Christ and then finding our way back to the light.

Sometimes there are things that happen in life that lead us to a dark place. Oftentimes that dark experience is something that we did not anticipate – something unexpected, that shakes our world and makes us wonder what is going on and where God is in it all. Our words become that of Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

Sometimes the experience of darkness is one that we chose. Sometimes that might come through an honest mistake, a decision that we thought was a good one and but that turned out not be as good as we thought – a decision that had dire consequences for our close relationships, for our finances, or in some other significant way. A decision that left us saying to ourselves, "If only . . ." Then there are times when we do more than make a poor decision: we freely choose to disobey God's will. We sin – and that has dire consequences for us not only in this life, but also in the life to come.

The birth of Christ, which we celebrate this night, is the bold proclamation that the prophecy of Isaiah is true! "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light!" What was true for the people of God in Isaiah's time in "fragmentary and varied ways" is now given to us "in this, the final age . . . through His Son." (Hebrews 1:1-2) Because Jesus *is* the light of all nations, the light of God's love shines as brightly at the darkest time of night as it does in the full light of day. God's love breaks forth like the dawn, through the fullness Christ's divinity that spoke to the fullness of his suffering humanity on the cross when he finally said, "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my Spirit." These words are also Christ's divinity speaking to our broken humanity. Christ's birth breaks open heaven into our world. Which had walked in darkness since the fall in the Garden of Eden. When Mary delivered Jesus, Jesus delivered us "from all lawlessness . . . to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good." We are eager to do good whenever we can say in the darkness, "into your hands, I commend my spirit."

When Jesus was born, he "commended" his divinity into our humanity. That decision led him from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross. The wood of the manger also led him to his baptism in the Jordan, where the glory of the Father's light shone on him to help us to know that this is God's beloved Son. "Listen to him!" The wood of the cross led to the light of the promise of eternal life through Christ's resurrection. The darkness of sin, suffering and death no longer have power over us, because of the light of the love of Jesus Christ.

Our personal decision to turn from the darkness to the light of Christ's love begins when we are able to say, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." Into your hands, I give my life, my heart, my entire self. Into your hands, I give every experience of my life, every struggle, every joy. "I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all." (*Prayer of Abandonment*, Brother Charles de Foucauld.)