

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Fourth Sunday of Advent December 20, 2009 C

WELCOME AND A BLESSED CHRISTMAS

I hope you enjoyed our celebration of that awe-filled moment in time when God “pitched his tent amongst us” and took on human form. What a tremendous act of humility for our Creator to become one of us. In the Incarnation, God came to live in our midst. He experienced in the deepest way our joys and sorrows. God, in the words of St. Paul:

Emptied himself (of his divinity) to assume the condition of a slave and became as all people are accepting even death on a cross (i.e., the death of a condemned criminal).

How amazingly profound of our God to join the human race in this way. He could have decided to join the human race as a child of privilege. Instead, he chose to live among us as a poor man—identifying in a special way with the lowly and outcast.

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:7-8), he said to Moses:

I have seen the miserable state of my people... I am well aware of their sufferings.

In the Incarnation, this same God decided to go one step further and *join* his suffering people. But he did not just visit the suffering. He actually took on the sufferings of all humankind. “*Ours were the sufferings he bore*” (Isaiah 53:4). In the Incarnation, God became “*a man of sorrows familiar with suffering*” (Isaiah 53:2). Never again could we say our God is aloof and distant. We may *think* he is. But the truth is he is closer to us than we are to ourselves. His Christmas name *Emmanuel* (God-with-us) reminds us that our Creator is not only Transcendent (totally other) but also Imminent (totally close with us).

Sometimes in our pain and suffering and loneliness, we cry out to God for help. We want desperately to feel his closeness and presence. If for some reason we cannot *feel* that presence, we must try to believe in the darkness of faith that he is very close. In fact, he is weeping with us and suffering. This is the truth whether we experience it or not, or believe it or not.

I believe one of the very successful tricks that Satan plays on us is helping us to believe that “God is absent”; “God is distant”; “God can’t be trusted”; “God doesn’t care.” When we think any of the above, we are, I believe, under the influence of the evil one.

It must sadden, if not break the heart of God, when we give in to the evil spirit’s promptings and believe God is absent, distant and uncaring.

Jesus comes especially to express solidarity with the forsaken and poor of the world.

When God decided to join our human race, he chose a people, very small (i.e., as a nation) and preoccupied. He joined a lower income family who could only afford the offering of the poor when they went to the Temple (Luke 2:24). He chose to be born not in a nice hospital or home, but in an abandoned cow barn. Just imagine the Creator of the world choosing to be born in a cow barn. His first visitors were not the important people in town but lowly shepherds from nearby hills. Shepherds were considered outcasts. Talk about God’s ways not being our ways. As an infant, his parents had to flee with him to a foreign country—not in fancy transportation but on a donkey. For the first few years of his life, he, Mary and Joseph were immigrants who spoke with a “funny accent.” Our God, who could literally have enjoyed the lifestyle of the rich and the famous, chose instead to live as an outcast.

How could we ever even think our God doesn’t care and love us madly. The late spiritual writer and monk, Thomas Merton, writes:

Into this world, this demented Inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, who are tortured, bombed and exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in the world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.

Catholic newspaper columnist and best-selling author, Fr. Ronald Rollheiser, writes:

Christ is born into the world of the marginalized more than into the world where power and influence reside. This goes against our common conception. But the point is made consistently and without compromise throughout the Gospels. The baby who's born at Christmas grows into the Jesus who tells us that there's a privileged presence of God within and among the poor, that the cross is erected where the outcasts are found, that the one who is rejected by society is central to the community, and that the quality of our faith is to be judged by the quality of justice in the land, and the quality of justice in the land is to be judged on the basis of how the weakest, not the strongest, fare. The birth of Jesus reverses Darwin's evolutionary principle: God's concern, unlike nature's, is not about the survival of the fittest but about the survival of the weakest. God has a privileged presence in the powerless. Not because the poor are morally superior to the rich; but, if Scripture is to be believed, because the poor more easily make a place for God in their lives. Their stables and manglers are more available for God's birth than are our homes, condos and hospitals, not to mention our boardrooms, talk shows, college classrooms, sports arenas and other centers of influence. Within virtually everything that our world judges to be important, there is no space for Christ to be born. That's a message our culture needs to hear. It's not so much that we're insincere, ungenerous or morally deficient. Sincerity, generosity and moral fiber abound, even among the rich. Overall, we're good-hearted. The problem is more that we are star-struck, celebrity-obsessed, too much convinced that God's real blessing lies in being forever... young, rich, good looking, healthy, talented, important, busy, productive, admired and entitled to have something interesting to do. The seduction of all of this, which drives our culture and our souls so much, is the most powerful narcotic the world has yet produced. Like all narcotics, it's not so much a question of morality as of reality. It tends to make everything far, far, from real. And it also makes the crib hard to find. As the Christmas stories make plain, the God who was born into this world at the first Christmas and who is still trying to take on real flesh in our world cannot easily be found in the

*places where we the young, rich, attractive, important, busy, productive, healthy and talented—do our stuff. **It's more our busyness than our badness that's the problem.** In our lives and in our world, perennially, there's no room at the inn, No place to welcome the God who wants to be born there. The Christ Child then, as at the first Christmas, must be born outside our city, among the poor, in places where we can find him only by letting ourselves be led by the poor, the children, or by some other guiding star.*

I think the above two quotes are very powerful and worthy of our prayerful reflections.

The Christmas story, most of all, calls us to show solidarity with the poor and forgotten members of our society, wherever they may be found. If we miss out on this piece of the Christmas event, we really miss out on the central meaning and message of Jesus' coming. We may not all respond in the same way. Some will give time and talent to helping the poor, others will give money to support ministries that daily seek to lift up the lot of the poor. If we are parents and grandparents, we should do what we can to help our children to grow up with a real desire to help the less fortunate members of our global family.

If you live in Melbourne and normally do not come to church, I invite you to reconsider doing so. If you have questions or issues, do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail or voicemail. If I do not get back to you, do not assume I am too busy or not interested. Rather, something may have gone wrong with the contact (e.g. your e-mail could have landed in spam mail or something else) or that your voicemail or phone message was not clear. If I do not respond to you, contact Teresa at the front desk (email: tromano@ascensioncatholic.org> or telephone 254-1595 ext. 3050).

For your information

If visiting and like to read and study scripture, consider visiting our website: ascensioncatholic.net. For my 28 articles on Catholic beliefs, see *Catechism Topics* on the homepage. For commentaries and reflections on the Sunday readings, click on *Welcome* and then *Archives*.

Wishing you a blessed Christmas,

