

Fourth Sunday of Advent B
December 20, 2020

- **A Covid-19 Christmas**
- **Some Lovely Reflections on the Great Mystery of God Becoming Human**

Greetings and Merry Christmas to you, dear reader!

Depending on the circumstances of our lives, each particular Christmas has its own unique flavor.

For those who recently lost a loved one, this Christmas will be especially sad. For those who just became engaged or got married, or had their first child, this Christmas will be happy and special for other reasons.

Because of the Coronavirus and the havoc it has wreaked on our global family, this Christmas will be like no previous Christmas. Fortunately, as I write this column (December 11), we are hearing the great news that people are already receiving the vaccine in Britain. Please, God, let it be effective.

- ◆ Since March, hundreds of thousands of Americans have died due to this deadly virus. Globally, perhaps millions have lost their lives.
- ◆ Millions will live with a pre-existing condition which may cause a lot of health issues in the years to come.
- ◆ Because of Covid-19, millions of our elderly are living in isolation.
- ◆ Countless numbers have lost their jobs and are experiencing poverty for the first time in their lives. Thousands of small businesses have shut down and many will never re-open.
- ◆ Only time will tell what the after-effects of the Coronavirus will have on family life. We already know its destructive impact on the lives of many families.
- ◆ In time we will find out the impact of Covid-19 on the education of children and their emotional lives.
- ◆ Certainly, the virus has greatly impacted church life. But as I often say: “Everything is relative.” Church life in Florida is very different from places like California. Here, a pretty large number of people can go to church, whereas in California and other places, hardly anyone can attend church. Again, only time will tell the full impact of Covid-19 on the spiritual and church lives of Christians. As we

know, millions of churchgoing Christians stopped going to church because of Covid-19. We wonder how many will return to church after we have a vaccine that is shown to work well?

Thank God, it seems help is on the way

The discovery of a vaccine for a deadly virus can take years or can never happen. It seems we may have three vaccines that are almost ready to roll out and, hopefully, expeditiously to protect everyone from Covid-19. The *rapid* discovery and projected roll-out of the vaccine is almost miraculous. Let’s continue to pray that these newly discovered vaccines will, in fact, be as effective as they promise.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us

Each Advent/Christmas Season, Christians pause to reflect on the great mystery that we call the Incarnation—the Word of God becoming flesh. Wouldn’t we have loved to be a fly on the wall when God decided to join the human family in the very unique way that he did?

Reflecting on the mystery of God we celebrate at Christmas, Maryknoll priest Fr. Joseph Veneroso writes:

They mystery and miracle of Christmas is God didn’t just take on our human nature but entered fully into time, transforming our *chronos* (routine, chronological time) into God’s *Kairos* (the fullness of time). The eternal became finite, the almighty became small and vulnerable. **The Creator of the universe deigned to be born in a small galaxy, in a minuscule solar system, on an insignificant planet, in a remote corner of the empire, to an oppressed people, in a little village.**

Centuries before, the prophet Micah foretold Bethlehem was by no means least among the tribes of Judah, for from it would come one to shepherd Israel—the promised and long-awaited Messiah!

St. Paul writes to both Galatians and Ephesians that Christ came “in the fullness of time.” The prophecies, the expectations, the people were all in place, whether they realized it or not. In other words, the Messiah finally came, not when the world was ready, not when the time was right. Jesus announced the *chronos* of the

kingdom had come: at the right time, in the right place, through the right events, in the right person.

So wonderful and amazing were the birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus that Western civilization divides history between B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini—Year of the Lord), consecrating humanity, history and time in the process.

When early Christians wanted to celebrate the birth of Christ, since the exact date is not mentioned in the Gospels, the Church chose what was then the darkest day of the year (the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere) to emphasize that Christ, our true Light, came when humankind needed him most.

Catholicism encourages us to ask what God is calling us to do with this precious, irreplaceable gift of time. St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:2, “Behold, now is an acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” Christ continues to transform our *chronos* into *Kairos*. Christ calls us each year to begin anew. Our faith responds: “It’s about time.”

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Those of you who frequently read my columns know I often rely on Fr. Flor McCarthy for his lovely insights into the Sunday readings. The following are some of Fr. Flor’s reflections on the Feast of Christmas.

Why December 25? Christ, Our Light

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that the actual date of Christ’s birth is unknown. December 25 was chosen by Rome around the year 300 AD. Why this particular date?

In olden times, before artificial light was invented, the season of winter was long, dark and dreary. And all of this was due to the fact that the sun had gone away. However, the people knew that at a certain point the sun began to come back, and things changed for the better. So they had a feast to celebrate the rebirth of the sun. It was known as the feast of the Unconquerable Sun (*Sol Invictus*).

To counter this pagan feast the Church chose December 25, which is close to the winter solstice (December 21) to celebrate the birth of Christ. Instead of worshipping the sun god, people were encouraged to worship Christ, the Son of God.

December is the darkest month of the year (in the northern hemisphere). It is a time when we appreciate the value of light. Christians saw the coming of Christ as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah: “The people that lived in darkness have seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone.” With

the coming of Christ a great light has dawned on the world.

Christmas means the coming of God’s light into the darkness of our world. This night is made radiant by the light of Christ. The liturgy is filled with references to light and to the glory of God. Christmas is a pool of light in the inky darkness of winter.

How dark the world would be if the light of Christ had never shone. The great Russian writer, Dostoevsky, put it like this: “While we are on earth, we grope in the dark, and but for the precious image of Christ before us, we would lose our way completely and perish.”

The teaching of Christ was truly a source of light to all who accepted him. But it was above all through his deeds and encounters with people that his luminous goodness manifested itself. Countless people came to him in darkness and went away bathed in light.

Christ’s light was not lit in Bethlehem once and then extinguished. Unlike the sun, Christ’s light knows no setting. It continues to shine for all who believe in him and follow him. The light of Christ has the power to draw people to its shining.

It’s not an illusory comfort, or a false reassurance that all is well when this is clearly not the case. It shines in the midst of devastation, disaster and upheaval. The light of Christ is a persistent and defiant light that no darkness can overpower.

Christ’s light comes as a friend. It brings healing not hurt, freedom not oppression, life not death. Those who follow him will always have the light of life. He teaches us who we are and what our destiny is. We are children of God, destined for eternal glory.

May the Lord in his goodness give us a taste of that joy which the shepherds experienced when the light of God’s glory shone around them on that First Christmas night.

How a bunch of birds in winter led one man to believe in the mystery of God becoming man

Even though Christmas is not as important as Easter, it is still a very important feast. It is concerned with something that constitutes the very heart of the Christian faith, namely, the Incarnation. The Incarnation means that God’s Son came down on earth, took on our human nature, in order to confer on us the dignity of children of God.

The Incarnation is a mystery. To say that something is a mystery doesn’t mean we can’t know *anything* about it. It just means that we can’t know *everything* about it. Faith doesn’t contradict reason; it transcends it.

A great story. Once there was a man who had a problem with the Incarnation. He just couldn’t believe that God’s Son became one of us, and was too honest to pretend. So on Christmas Eve, when his wife and

children went to church, he stayed at home.

Shortly after they had left, it began to snow. He went to the window to watch it fall. “If we must have Christmas,” he thought, “then let it be a white Christmas.” A short while later he heard a thudding sound. It was quickly followed by another, then another. It sounded as if someone was throwing snowballs at the window of the living room.

He went to the front door to investigate. There he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in their desperate search for shelter, had seen the light and flew into the window.

“I can’t let these little creatures lie there and freeze to death,” he thought. He wondered what he could do to help them.

Then he remembered the barn. It would provide a nice warm shelter for them. He put on his coat and made his way through the snow to the barn. There he put on the light, but the birds wouldn’t come.

“Food will bring them,” he thought. So he scattered a trail of breadcrumbs all the way into the barn. But the birds still wouldn’t come. Then he tried to shoo them into the barn by walking around them and waving his arms at them. But they took alarm and scattered in all directions.

Then he said to himself, “They find me a strange and terrifying creature. If only there was some way I could get them to trust me.”

At that moment the church bells began to ring. He stood silently as they rang out the glad tidings of Christmas: “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. To those who accepted him he gave power to become children of God.”

Then he sank to his knees in the snow and said, “Lord, now I understand why you had to become one of us.”

Why did God who is all-powerful, become small, weak and vulnerable? Because that was the only way he could reach us. The only way to win our trust. “It was essential that he should in this way become completely like his brothers” (Heb 2:17).

The Incarnation is a mystery of love. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. He placed himself at our side. He made himself our friend, our brother, our companion on the road to God’s kingdom. He walked the way himself. Then he said to us, “Follow me.” This was not a command but an invitation.

The Son of God comes not as a judge but as a savior. He comes to reveal to us our dignity as God’s children, and the glory of our eternal destiny in heaven. This is the good news. This is the great joy that the angels announced to the shepherds, and that

is announced to us tonight (today). Let us open our hearts to receive the great joy.

The shepherds teach us that religion is not about finding God outside of our lives but inside of our lives.

It is sometimes said that religion is an escape from the harsh realities of life. This is a complete misunderstanding of religion.

Consider the story of the shepherds. Even though the story depicts a way of life that is gone, we shouldn’t dismiss it because of that.

At the time of Jesus, the status of shepherds was a lowly one. Society had pushed them to the margins. The world passed them by. Yet it was to such as these that the good news of Jesus’ birth was announced, and it was just such as these who welcomed the news of that birth.

We can picture them in the quiet countryside, keeping watch over their sheep. They were poor and in darkness. But that meant they were ripe for the Good News. God comes especially to those who are poor, and who are not afraid to admit it. Material poverty is the most obvious kind of poverty. But there is a worse kind of poverty—spiritual poverty.

It was while the shepherds were engaged in their lowly task of minding sheep that the great news came to them: “Today in the town of Bethlehem a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” God came to them as they were watching over their flocks. Religion is not about finding God outside of our lives, but within our lives—in the midst of our daily occupations.

Having received the message of the angel, the shepherds went to Bethlehem, and found that it was as the angel said. With their outward eyes all they saw was a child “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” But with their inward eyes, the eyes of faith, they recognized this child as the Saviour sent by God.

What difference did the experience make to them? In one sense, it made no difference. When the excitement died down, and the brightness faded, they had to go back to the same lowly work and the same obscure lives.

But in another sense, it made the world of difference. The Gospel tells us that they went back “glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard.” Afterwards they were the same persons but with a different consciousness.

They now had a new vision, and a new hope. Their lowly lives were illuminated by a sense of God’s goodness to them. The world might have forgotten them, but God had not forgotten them. “Today a saviour has been born *for you*.” Yes, for them!

Even though we haven’t seen the angel, we have heard the message of the angel. And tonight (today) we have come to see the Christ Child. Like the shepherds,

we must try to see him with the eyes of faith. In this way, we won't just see a tiny baby. We will see our Saviour, Christ the Lord. We will see God's love for us made flesh.

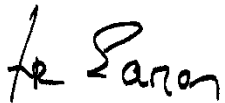
And, like the shepherds, we have to go back to our homes and to the tasks that go to make up our daily lives. But we will see those tasks differently, because we see ourselves differently. In the divine Child, we see our own divinity.

Religion is not an escape from life. Religion leads to a deeper commitment to life. We have to learn how close God can be to us, and how close we can be to God, in the midst of our sometimes painful and sometimes joyful lives.

Religion addresses our deepest longings. It extends human life, adding a dimension that fuels the life deep inside us, that fleeting but precarious life that we are called upon to live and live to the full.

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A Very Happy Christmas,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.