

HOMILY CHRISTMAS 2011 HT-W/XII-PC

At the Harry S Truman Presidential Library and Museum, there hangs a photo of President Truman w/ Chaim Weizmann, then president of the newly formed state of Israel. As Truman had been instrumental in the resurrection of Israel as a political entity, Weizmann brought him a scroll of the Torah as a gesture of appreciation. The photo shows both men beaming broadly w/ Truman holding the scroll in front of him. The story behind the photo is even more, shall we say, interesting. It is reported that the gift was a total surprise to President Truman. Such a surprise that the president did not even know what it was. And so in a moment of diplomatic inspiration, the devout Baptist Harry S Truman exclaimed, "Why thank you, I've always wanted one of these!" Whether the account is true or simply a piece of political propaganda, it is most assuredly a good story!

Surprise gifts are risky propositions. The danger is that the gift may not be what the recipient wants. Now, when gifts are given to little children, it's easier to guess what they want and surprise them, esp. if their parents drop a hint. But as we age and our desires grow more complicated, our preferences become less predictable. We priests, by the way, since we don't have close family, are notoriously difficult to figure out; when asked, I usually request money--partly out of a habit acquired as a pastor, partly because money is always the right color, and it always fits. And so we older folks normally make a list and we usually don't get surprised by what's in our stockings on Christmas morning. Nonetheless, there is a heartwarming sensation about surprise gifts that we miss. We long for that childlike delight in receiving a present that was unexpected but dearly desired. Knowing what is setting under the tree takes the thrill out of opening the package, even if it beats having to shepherd a herd of white elephants from the living room! Predictability is a safe but boring proposition.

Now God loves to surprise human beings, esp. adults who think they have it all figured out. The gift of Jesus Christ, the gift which stands at the center of the Christian feast of Christmas, is the biggest and best surprise gift of all. For in Jesus Christ, God gives us his only begotten Son; indeed, God gives us himself; he couldn't give us anything more. And so we human beings get a chance to share in his divine life. We couldn't have asked for anything better.

Unfortunately, not everyone gets into the Christmas spirit. And that's because the gift is such a huge surprise that some cannot believe it's true. If you listen to unbelievers grouching about Christmas, most of the lamentation boils down to the fact that they just think it's a silly, absurd proposal. The more philosophically inclined object to the idea that the all-powerful, eternal Creator of the universe could somehow fit into this little baby in the manger. Others take exception to the notion that God shows his love for the world by descending to earth in such an unremarkable manner. More precisely, they argue that if God really loves the human race, why bother with this long tedious business of incarnation, involving conception, birth, growth, and

death; why would the Lord assume the whole course of a human life, a rather obscure life at that, w/ minimal immediate impact on the global level? Why not, they retort, just come down in plain view with thunder and lightning and set things right in the world by using his mighty power to eliminate injustice, poverty, disease, and all the assorted sources of misery that afflict the human beings whom this deity supposedly loves so much?

The Christmas lessons provide an answer to these difficulties. The Scriptures teach that the God of Christmas is Emmanuel, that means, "God with us." Our God so loves the people of the world, that he wants to enter into an intimate communion with us; he wants to form a bond so tight that it requires a profound participation in the human condition with all its unpleasant dimensions. If God had come down as an invincible, avenging angel, he would remain light years removed from the human race. But God loves us such that he wants to be with us even in our misery. To be truly Emmanuel, to be God with us in fact, he must literally be with us in all the heartrending agonies that set men apart from God, those trials that make us human and not divine. And so our Lord takes the entirety of a human nature into himself and embraces the full spectrum of human existence by being born of woman as an ordinary man and by dying as an ordinary man on the cross. God shares fully in our humanity so that we may share fully in his divinity.

At Christmas, God surprises men and women with his love. Now accepting this surprise Gift on our part requires faith, a faith that reasonably acknowledges the Almighty can accomplish miracles, like the Incarnation, which the human intellect can never comprehend. That is why, incidentally, faith is harder to come by in advanced societies like our own. Human beings in affluent western nations are accustomed to understanding many matters that were riddles to their forebears; and we too quickly infer that the whole scope of reality, including the subtle operations of divine providence, should be comprehensible to our minds. But accepting the Gift of Christmas requires faith that presupposes humility before God; celebrating Christmas demands humble recognition that the mystery of God's love is a marvel that will forever outstrip our capacity to comprehend.

I know that the liturgies of Christmas draw folks who may not have come to church in a while. You know, the shepherds who came to that first Christmas weren't necessarily the most religious of men. But they got a special angelic invitation. And they came. And they were humble enough to believe. And they were totally transformed. I'm not sure how you came here tonight, but I hope that this will be a Nativity experience for you. I hope you, and all the regulars as well, will find the humility to join the shepherds of Bethlehem and kneel before the mystery of Christmas. I hope you'll find Jesus in our church--in the beauty of the crèche, in the sights and sounds of the sacred liturgy, in the people in the pews. And I hope you'll abide with the Lord in his church during the weeks and years ahead, so that one day you'll share in that eternal joy which the newborn King offers to all who believe.