

Homily  
Christmas  
Dec. 25, 2022

“I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.” Dear friends, it thrills my heart to be able to repeat these words of the angel that we heard in Luke’s gospel. “Today a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.” The angel spoke those words on a specific date in history, sometime around the year 4 BC. And those words were proclaimed in a particular place, just outside of the town of Bethlehem, which isn’t too far from Jerusalem. And those words were addressed to a certain group of shepherds tending their flocks at night. We don’t know their names or how many there were, probably just a few.

But the message of the angels isn’t just for that time or place, or just to that group of shepherds. What happened in Bethlehem that night is for all times, for all places, and for all peoples, great and small. The Savior was born in the flesh, on that day, in that stable in Bethlehem, but he has come for all of us, to be with us always, to offer salvation not just to a few but to everyone. He is with us still, still offering us the grace of salvation, still giving the gift of God’s love to all who will receive him.

I think for all of us the celebration of our Lord’s birth reaches its high point with this celebration of the Mass. In the Mass of Christmas – Christ’s Mass – we enter once again into the mystery of God who came among us in our own humanity so that he could save all humanity. He comes in the flesh so that he could offer his flesh for the life of the world, for each one of us. And he makes himself present to us still in the Eucharist, the sacrament of his incarnate love. The Bread of Life was laid in a manger to give life to the world. Isn’t it amazing that God chose to save us in this way? He could have done so from a distance, simply by an act of his divine will. But instead he comes down to us from his heavenly dwelling, and makes his dwelling among us as a newborn child. He throws himself into our human condition by becoming one of us.

At that first Christmas, Jesus gave himself to us as a gift, but that gift wasn’t a one-time thing. As Paul tells us, the savior Jesus Christ “gave himself for us to deliver us.” And that gift endures and is for all. On this Christmas night, we see Jesus laid in a manger, still giving his flesh for the life of the world. Through his gift of the Eucharist the same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem remains with us and invites us to become one with him. He makes us members of his body, filling us with his life and his love. And he sends us forth to reveal that same love to our world. The birth of Jesus happened in the quiet of the night in an out-of-the-way place, but the grace of his birth is still present in every time and in every place. In the Church, in his Word and sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist, he is God with us, Emmanuel. He is the Son of God who comes to break the bonds of sin and death and to share with us the gift of his own divine life.

Last summer I had the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and of course, we visited Bethlehem, a name which actually means “house of bread.” We saw the Shepherd’s Field on the outskirts of town, where the angels announced the good news to a group of unsuspecting shepherds, outsiders who lived on the margins. We prayed at the grotto of the Nativity, the place where Jesus was born and laid in a manger. We celebrated Mass just a few short yards from that place, and it made me realize that Jesus continues to give himself to us now just as he did at Bethlehem. From the dirty little stable where he was born, Jesus continues to enter the messiness of our lives, shedding his own light on our darkness, offering us freedom from the slavery of sin, and with the hands of a babe reaching out to us with unconditional love.

And he stays with us, if we'll invite him in. That's the remarkable thing about the event of Christmas, it doesn't end after December 25. We don't commemorate this event just as something that happened long ago, and is now done and over with. When the Son of God was born in that stable, he was all in for the long haul. He came to us and he remains with us, and that's why we celebrate at all. "The grace of God has appeared to us," as Paul says. His love has come to us in the person of Jesus, and he will never take it back.

Dear friends, let us open our eyes again this Christmas to the abiding love of God that came to us at Bethlehem. And let us welcome him into our lives every day, without fear and without hesitation. The Servant of God Dorothy Day said, "Our soul is so much like a stable, it is so poor and unsatisfactory.... Yet, I believe if Jesus can be born in a stable, maybe he can also be born in me." Indeed he can. The great St. Jerome lived right there at the place where Jesus was born, and he said, "Happy is he who has Bethlehem in his heart, the heart in which Christ is born daily."

Brothers and sisters, may we all have Bethlehem in our hearts so that Christ can be born in us every day. I pray that you and your loved ones will experience the incredible grace of the God who is with us always. May every trial and difficulty of our lives be met with his consoling presence so that we may know that we are never alone. And as we all return to Bethlehem again this Christmas, may the grace and peace of Jesus Christ be with you always.