

Christmas – Dec. 24-25, 2017

This year we are using all four Mass settings and readings so I will not be preaching specifically on the readings that we heard today. However all of the readings and prayers are joyfully proclaiming and speaking about the great mystery and event of God coming to us, and even greater, that God is with us, sharing all of our human joys and suffering and is with us forever.

All the Christmas readings are wonderful, but the first reading for the feast of Christmas from the prophet Isaiah says it best: “For the Lord delights in you and makes your land his spouse. As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you.” In Jesus joining himself to our humanity, God is marrying all of mankind.

Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus. We celebrate in every way that we can the gift God gave us when he sent us Jesus and all that this gift means.

We celebrate with lights for he is the light of the world. We celebrate with music for he came to bring harmony and peace to the world. We celebrate with gifts for he is God’s gift sent to us – God’s only Son.

What a great gift that God has come from heaven to join himself so closely to us, but we can never forget the ultimate reason why Jesus was sent to us. Jesus came down to us in order to lift us up, to make us sharers in God’s life and to make us true sons and daughters of God who will be with God forever.

That is what gives us hope in this world, hope in times of sadness and crises, hope in times of war and violence. God has great plans for us -- greater than anyone is able to imagine. Jesus came to lead us on the way that will bring us to the eternal happiness for which we were created.

Christmas is more than the celebration of the birth of Jesus. In Christmas we are made aware

of our own rebirth into eternal life which came through faith and baptism, and which is nourished weekly in the sacrament of the Mass. In today's Mass, in union with Jesus, who was born and died and has risen and is with us yet, we celebrate God's love for us and ask that someday we may celebrate the love forever in heaven.

However, though we may understand all this in our heads, we, and many others in the world may be struggling to bring this understanding down into our hearts. We live in what seems to be an increasingly secular world which has little time for God. Even though we try to surround ourselves as much as we can by a community of faith, it is hard for us not to be affected or weakened in faith by the secular world around us.

Many times we worry about how much faith we have or how weak it is. But there is good news, as the angels said, for all the world. Like the sun breaking forth in the morning or a burning torch at night, the Christmas message of Emmanuel (God with us) cannot be hidden. Even in the darkest times of our life and our world, God is with us. Whether saint or sinner, strong in faith or barely hanging on, God calls each of us "His Delight" for God does follow human conventions and norms, nor does God chose perfect people to reveal and carry his message through the ages. God does not depend on our human strength but always works through the grace he gives to us.

Keep in mind that even if we are not aware of God's presence, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. As John the Baptist said a few Sundays ago, "there is one among you whom you do not recognize."

There are many good things that we do and take credit for, but it is actually through God's grace that we have allowed these good works to be done by us. --- Look at all the good around you and

give thanks for the grace of God that has brought all these good things into the world and into your life.

God's presence and Christ's presence is always visible in the world, but it is usually hidden below the surface of things. Just look at the hiddenness of Christ's birth and all its deeper meanings that we do not immediately see.

As one person wrote, "The crib not only commemorates Christ's coming to earth, it is there also as a symbol of Christ's birth in us. It is not just an event of 2000 years ago --- it equally means that because of that event, Christ is born in us today." (Caryll Houselander)

The crib scene is a reminder that Christ is in our life and history and in this present moment --- here in our midst and around us and in us now.

Christ is being born into our life in a hidden yet real way all the time as we open ourselves to forgiveness, care and love for others. We can recognize this presence through faith.

If we struggle to see Christ in the world or in our life, it may be that we don't understand that Christ and Christmas are matters of faith and are seen by looking at them in a different way. Faith is a gift of God.

Pray for faith if you struggle to see Christ in your life and be patient. Sometimes the vision of faith is given to us instantly. Sometimes it takes 9 months, like the birth of a baby. Sometimes it takes longer, even a lifetime. God is always there, but sometimes it takes a long time for our faith to grow and be able to see him clearly.

On the Third Sunday of Advent when we talked about joy – we said don't look for joy in things, rather look inside ourselves. The same is true in looking for Christ's presence.

Christ is in the world and all around us. His risen presence fills the world. He is Lord and

King of all the universe. But until we see his presence in ourselves we will find it hard to see him in the world. Look at the disciples of Christ. Jesus was physically present to them, yet believing in who he really was took time for them. Remember St. Thomas, who said unless I put fingers in his wounded hands or side, I will not believe.

So, we have the bad news that it can be hard to see Christ. The good news is that he is already here. He is so very close to all of us all the time. Every time you look at a nativity scene, let it remind you that Christ is with us and how near he is to you.

For 2000 years since his birth he has shared in all our human experiences in the deepest way from birth to death and beyond.

Pray and ask for faith and learn to see with the eyes of faith. We are called to walk by faith and not by sight.

Look at Mary. She could not see or know all that was asking of her when the angel came and spoke to her. However, Mary had faith that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled.

We can have all kinds of Christmas parties and exchange all kinds of gifts, but there is no real Christmas without Christ. Christmas and life itself are a matter of faith. Have faith in Christ. Live by faith. And then share your faith so that others may have Christmas. And when you think that you have little or no faith – look at the goodness of yourself, at the good that you do, and all goodness in the world and see that Christ is always very near to you and to every person.

Let us celebrate Christ's birth and coming to us and all the difference that his presence with us has made and is making.

