

Christmas Homily 2014 – Year B
December 24th / 25th – St. Monica's

Isaiah 9:2-7 - "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For unto us a child is born ... and his name shall be called: Wonderful Counsellor, Everlasting Father, Mighty God, Prince of Peace."

Psalm 96: Sing to the Lord a new song!

Titus 2:11-14 - "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, with the hope and manifestation of God's glory."

Luke 2:1-14 - "Good news and great joy to all the world- today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord."

Isaiah 52:7-10 – “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news.

Psalm 98: “All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.”

Hebrews 1:1-6 – “Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, reflection of God’s glory, exact imprint of God’s very being, sustaining all through his Word.”

John 1:1-18 - Incarnation: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.”

CHRISTMAS IS FOR REAL: INVITATION TO AN ENCOUNTER

If there is one day in the year when skepticism melts away and the believer hidden inside each of us resurfaces, that day is probably Christmas. But is it all just a nice story that we tell once a year, a play we act out – and then return to business as usual? In his recent **LETTER TO A NON-BELIEVER**, **Pope Francis** engages in a dialogue with Eugenio Scalfari – a self-professed agnostic and editor of the influential Italian daily “*LA REPUBBLICA*”. He writes:

“For me, faith was born of an encounter with Jesus. It was a personal encounter that touched my heart and gave new direction and meaning to my life. It was an encounter made possible by the community of faith in which I lived, and thanks to which I gained access to the word of God in Sacred Scripture, to new life in Christ through the Sacraments, to fraternity with all, and to service of the poor, who are the true image of the Lord.”

Without the Church, I would not have been able to encounter Jesus, even with the awareness that the immense gift of faith is kept in the fragile clay jars of our humanity. From this personal experience of faith, lived in the Church, I find myself able to listen to your questions and, with you, to seek the paths along which we may walk together. What strikes me about Jesus is that his authority is not something external or imposed, but rather comes from within and is self-evident. Jesus impacts us, shocks us, and renews us, and this comes from his relationship with God the Father, whom he calls intimately “Abba”!” (Pope Francis, [LETTER TO A NON-BELIEVER](#), 4 September 2013)

What is Pope Francis telling us here? I find it remarkable how he never goes on the defensive, or gets drawn into dead-end philosophical arguments, or uses faith in God as a club to attack the evils of secularism and moral relativism. Francis speaks the language of **personal experience: of an encounter with Jesus which transformed** his life and to which he now bears witness. It is one thing to say “I believe in God.” It is quite another thing to say: **“God believes in me, and I have discovered this through my relationship with his Son, Jesus Christ.”** Similarly, it is one thing to say, “I believe that Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary, was born in Bethlehem, during the reign of Herod and Caesar Augustus.” It is something else to testify: **“The Word of God was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory: I have encountered him and He now lives within me.”**

So how do we get from the head to the heart, from philosophical speculation to spiritual experience, from observation to transformation? How can our Christmas become more than a season for competitive gift-giving, compulsive shopping and partying, excessive consumption of food and drink, and disappointed expectations – and become what it is truly intended to be: a **life-changing encounter** with Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who reveals and reflects God’s unconditional and infinite love for all his creation?

A beautiful pop-culture illustration of this movement can be found in the Christmas episode of one of my favourite TV series of all times, **“Nothing Sacred”**. An ABC prime-time drama, set in a fictional inner-city Roman Catholic parish, it only ran 15 episodes in 1997-98 before being cancelled.

A couple of years ago, the episodes began appearing one-by-one on YouTube, and thanks to modern technology, are all viewable now – for free! (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2k2R1Y9z0Nc>.)

The story takes place on Christmas Eve, with the phone ringing off the hook, and the young secretary, Rachel, answering: “St. Thomas, Merry Christmas! ... Uh-huh ... Midnight ... Bye!” She turns to the rest of the staff, and asks, “What time do they think ‘Midnight Mass’ is?” Meanwhile, the other members of the team are all dealing with issues which will no doubt be familiar to some of you. Recently-married youth minister J.A. is being guilt-tripped by his sister over his decision to spend Christmas with his new wife’s family: “Go ahead, break Mommy’s heart!” Recovering alcoholic Fr. Leo, who grew up in an abusive home, loves Christmas, but is plagued by memories of drunken arguments and fights. Providing comic relief is the “outsider” on the team, business manager Sidney, who comes from a secular Jewish background. He comments that “deforestation seems a strange way to celebrate God’s birthday”, and is genuinely astonished to learn that the Bible says nothing about Christmas trees, snow, Santa Claus, or even the names of the three Kings. At one point, he asks, “So just what IS in the story?”

Meanwhile, the parish staff is in conflict over all kinds of issues: the right (and wrong) way to decorate a Christmas tree, who will go over the lines for the Christmas Pageant with the children, and most memorably, who will give the homily at Midnight Mass. Will it be newly-ordained Father Eric, anxious to impress his parents, who would have preferred him to become a lawyer rather than a priest? Or will it be long-serving Sister Maureen, the glue that holds the parish together, struggling with restrictions on her role as a woman in a male-dominated church? (At St. Monica’s, this doesn’t seem to be an issue: no matter how much I try to share, this is my 10th straight Christmas preaching!) The tensions escalate into an argument, when the radical young pastor, appropriately also named Father Ray(!), steps in and says, “*Let’s pray that God show us the true meaning of Christmas.*” At that very moment, Celia and Rigoberto, a refugee couple from El Salvador, fleeing bounty hunters and the immigration police, come rushing into the church, seeking sanctuary and protection.

I have often used this episode in classes I teach on team-building and collaborative ministry: how the emergence of a pressing need calls people beyond preoccupations with roles and personal agendas, in order to focus on a shared mission, a higher set of values. But viewing it this year through Christmas lenses, I saw that what brings about real change and **transformation** in the characters has to do with an **encounter**.

For Sr. Maureen, the encounter happens through **prayer**. Wounded and angered by the sexism of her younger colleague, she leaves carrying the freshly-repaired statue of the Virgin Mary from the Nativity Scene, saying; "Let's see how you ordained persons handle an all-male Christmas." But as she opens her Bible and prays, she hears the words of Mary in a new way: *"Be it done unto me according to your word. My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because he has looked upon the lowliness of his servant."* Turning to the statue, she says, with deep feeling: "You always said Yes. Couldn't you have said no, just once? No, I suppose not. Come on. We don't want to miss Christmas!"

Sr. Maureen still feels the sting of her experience of injustice, but she knows that she cannot turn her back on a faith that gives her life, in which she experiences God alive within her. She knows that the people of the parish needs her, and that she needs them, for this too is where she meets God, where she welcomes Jesus, as Mary did. (She also gets to preach in the end, but you have to watch the episode to find out how it happens!)

Young Father Eric, ordained barely a year, is anxious to prove himself. Unlike Fr. Ray, who never wears his collar, Fr. Eric is never seen without his. He prepares for his homilies laboriously, as if working on a term paper in the seminary, but they often fall flat. He longs for order, peace and structure, and he finds St. Thomas' inner-city ministry chaotic and confusing. When the unexpected arrival of the refugee couple sends the church into lockdown as it is declared a "sanctuary", he explodes in anger to his pastor: "8 hours to Midnight Mass and the Feds are coming. You got what you always wanted, Ray: complete and total chaos. These people can't live in our church forever. We are guardians of a sacred trust. What kind of a church doesn't have Christmas Mass?" In the end, he takes off his collar, throws it down, and takes refuge in the church, sitting dejectedly by the Nativity Scene.

There, he meets Celia. She tells Fr. Eric that she wants him to understand why she can never go back to El Salvador. She shares her story: that one day, as she returned with Rigoberto from catechizing and preaching in the next village, she witnessed the massacre of the entire town, including her own husband and children, in a military reprisal against their Gospel-inspired work for justice. Through this **encounter** with Celia, Fr. Eric is **transformed**: he sees her no longer as a burden or a disruption, spoiling his orderly Christmas, but as one who teaches him that Jesus also came into a world of danger and violence, barely escaping from Herod's cruel henchmen. He hears the words of Matthew's Gospel in an entirely new light: *"In Rama a voice was heard, sorrows and loud lamentations, the mother is weeping for her children, and she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."* Fr. Eric promises to do all he can to ensure that Celia and Rigoberto. He will never hear the Christmas story in the same way again. Through this **encounter**, he is **transformed**. Through Celia, he learns of a God who values justice over order, freedom over comfort, life over death. The story unfolds from there ... and without giving it all away, Christ's birth **is** celebrated at midnight: in the warm glow of the parish church; in the clamour and clutter of a prison cell; in a safe haven for the young couple. (Spoiler alert: both Fr. Eric and Maureen get to preach, but not as you might expect!) Darkness gives way to light. Christ is born.

In Jesus, we encounter a God who reaches out to embrace us and hold us: as a mother nurses a baby crying out in hunger, as a father tenderly comforts a child who is afraid of the dark. The mystery of Christmas is a God who reaches out to us, giving us the touch, the embrace, the kiss we have always wanted. Our masks are peeled away, our vulnerabilities revealed, our hurt and fear exposed to God's healing love. But in the mystery of the Word made flesh, we also encounter a God who himself enters the world in weakness and vulnerability, who entrusts himself to our care. Jesus, the Light of the World, the Eternal Son of God, becomes an infant: dependent on his mother's breast for nourishment, his father's care for protection, the hospitality of strangers for a home.

The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar says it well: ***"After a mother has smiled for a long time at her child, the child will begin to smile back; she has awakened love in its heart, and she awakes recognition as well. ... In the same way, God presents himself to us as love. Love radiates from God and instills the light of love in our hearts."***

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis uses the language of **joy** to describe this transformative encounter with Jesus:

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin and sorrow, from inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew. (...) Encountering Christ, letting yourself be caught up in and guided by his love, enlarges the horizons of experience, gives you a firm hope that will not disappoint. Faith is not a light that scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and accompanies us on the journey. To those who suffer and struggle, God does not provide arguments which explain everything; rather, His response is that of an accompanying, loving, luminous presence.”

At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus: that “accompanying, loving, luminous presence” who alone can liberate us from the thousand difficulties and disappointments which make it so hard for us to live as people of faith, hope and love, in the midst of a violent and dangerous world. But was this not also the very kind of world Jesus himself came into? Into the darkness of murdered students and teachers in Pakistan, of kidnapped schoolgirls in Nigeria, of persecuted Christians and Yaziris and Shia Muslims in Syria, of overflowing refugee camps, of longer lines at our own food pantries and homeless shelters – into this darkness, Christ comes as a tiny light, yet one that refuses to be put out: “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

This is my prayer for myself, for each of you, for your families and friends on this Christmas night (day): may we experience not only the consolations of the external observances of Christmas – the time off work and school, the gifts, the food and drink, the parties and gatherings – but even more deeply, the encounter to which the newborn Christ summons each of us. Jesuit Father James Martin says it well:

“If you're overwhelmed by Christmas stress, or anxiety, or frustration, or loneliness, or sadness, remember that only one thing is necessary: You need only to open the door of your heart to God. God loves you more than you can know. And God will enter your heart in a new way this Christmas. Just open.”

Pope Francis speaks of the Incarnation as God initiating a “revolution of tenderness,” one which summons us to embody and bring that same tenderness to others. As we celebrate the Lord’s birth, we rejoice in the creative and undying love of God which is revealed there, and we become bearers of that light and joy and mercy to all we meet.” (Bishop Don Bolen)

Light looked down and saw the darkness. ‘I will go there,’ said Light.

Peace looked down and saw war. “I will go there,” said Peace.

Love looked down and saw hatred. I will go there,” said Love.

So he, the Lord of Light, the Prince of Peace, the King of Love, came down and crept in beside us.”

(John Bell, Cloth for the Cradle, 1997)

Let him in. Let the newborn Christ child creep in beside you, look at you with love, warm you with his breath, reach out and caress you with his infant arms. Allow him to meet you in your poverty and vulnerability, to enfold you with his tenderness. So on the stillness of this Christmas night (day), may the words of this prayer echo within our hearts, drawing us into an **encounter** with Jesus, the Word made Flesh, and with his Spirit alive in each of us:

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Amen.

Merry Christmas.