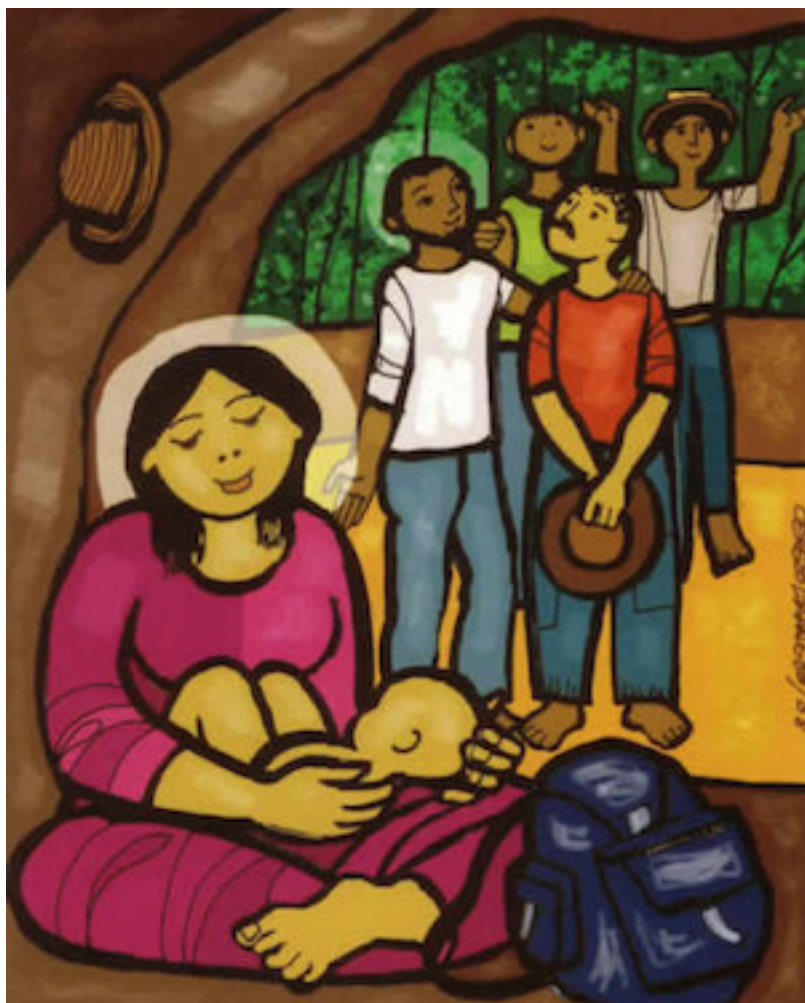


The Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord



The Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord,
Christmas: Divine Starlight Merry Christmas, everyone.

This is a beautiful time of the year. It is a time to celebrate family and friends, it is a time of warmth, a time of peace. Like most of you, I like driving at night through the subdivisions looking at Christmas lights. Although many people are trying to eliminate the religious significance of Christmas, the very existence of all the lights points to Jesus Christ. He is the Light of the World. The Christmas colours of green and red point to the hope in the Lord attained through the sacrifice of his life. Both the ancient Jews of the East and the pagan Romans of the West celebrated light at this time of year. The Jews celebrated the restoration of the Temple from the Syrians by lighting a candle on the Menorah for each day of the celebration now called Hanukkah.

The pagan Romans celebrated the sun-god Apollo's conquest of night on the Winter solstice. Christians outdid these feasts by celebrating the Nativity of the Lord. We are people of light, but we are also people who find light in a world of darkness. John Shea tells the wonderful story of how he took a group of children on a camping trip when he was a young man. The children woke up in the middle of the night when the fire went out. It was a cloudy, moonless night. The total darkness evidently scared those who were used to some sort of light, perhaps a nightlight, when they went to sleep. Shea was awakened by one of the children crying and then the rest calling for help. He told them all to be still, stay where they were and just wait for a little while. As if on cue, the clouds must have been blown away, because the stars came out. With their eyes adjusted to being in pitch black, the stars absolutely lit up campsite.

The children ran around the campsite and to the nearby stream. They laughed as only children at play laugh. They laughed at the experience of seeing a world lit up by Starlight. This is the light that we, People of Light, experience. Jesus Christ, the Light of the World has come, but the world is still in darkness. Those who are attune to the Light of the Lord, though, those who are capable of being guided by His light, we, are people of Starlight. We need to adjust our eyes to the Lord's starlight. This is all poetic, but how do we attain the focus we need in a world of chaos, confusion, in a world of darkness? The answer is Jesus. For a Christian, the answer to all questions about life is Jesus. We look at his life. Born in poverty. Hunted as an infant. Mocked as an adult and crucified for loving others, he brought kindness and peace to those who allowed him into their lives. He would not allow darkness to overcome him.

He would not become cynical. He would not succumb to hatred. He would not let selfishness determine his choices. He lived to love. He would not give up on love or give up on anyone for that matter. His love turned the darkness of the Good Thief crucified next to him into light. The former criminal was attune to the presence of God's love, his eyes were adjusted to Divine Starlight. Many people will be visiting each of us during the Christmas celebrations. Let's be frank, we really do not want to see some of these people. They will conveniently forget their nastiness over the years and walk into our homes saying "Merry Christmas." They will act as though nothing negative has transpired. We are upset, not just because we were hurt, but because they have hurt someone we love.

We have a golden opportunity here, though. We can turn the typical Christmas phoniness into an experience of the Lord if we make the determination right now to love them, to be kind to them and not to be concerned with whether or not we will be hurt once more. If we are sincere, they just might catch a glimpse of starlight in muddle of Christmas sentimentality. That is how the Tremendous Lover would act. That is how we act as people of Divine Starlight. To be people of Divine Starlight our focus must be on Jesus.

When he sacrificed so much of himself for others, when he dropped everything to heal a man's dying servant, to raise a widow's son, to restore dignity to a prostitute and integrity to a thieving tax collector, when he gave and gave until he had not more life to give, he did all in a loving way, a kind way. There is no evidence of him ever being mean, cold or nasty. That is what Jesus was like.

That's how we who call ourselves Christians must be. In fact, the greatest compliment that anyone could ever say to any of us is "When I am with you, I know what Jesus must be like." When we try to be like the Lord, we will see the Divine starlight in the middle of the darkness. When we are like the Lord, we will be the Divine starlight in the middle of a dark world. For many, Christmas is a time of sadness, a time of more intense darkness. Some of us have lost loved ones and miss them intensely during the holidays. What would Jesus be like if he was there, with the grieving spouse, the stricken parent? Would he say, "Get over it, move on with life." I don't think so. What would Jesus be like? Well, he wept at Lazarus' tomb, didn't he. He would cry, and hug, and love and not be concerned with the words he said, just with being present supporting and loving those whose grief is intensified at Christmas. If we can be loving in this way, if we can be like the Lord in this way, then we will be Divine starlight in the middle of a dark world. For some Christmas is a time of deep sadness because their lives have not followed the plan they set out for themselves and their children. Marriages have failed, careers have been disrupted by sickness or sudden unemployment, families have been wounded by addictions, and good people have suffered. What would Jesus be like if he were to spend time with

these people, in their families?

Would he be prying, "What really happened?" accusatory, "Couldn't you have done more?" or would he be supportive of the new direction taken, marvelling at the sacrifices made, happy for the strength of love that has withstood unforeseen changes in life. When we are loving instead of judgmental, we are being like the Lord. We will be Divine starlight in the middle of a dark world. Some are convinced that the darkness they feel at Christmas or throughout the year for that matter is self-inflicted. How many girls suffer at Christmastime because they were persuaded by those older than them or supposedly wiser than them to terminate a pregnancy? Absolution might remove the sin, but it does nothing for the pain. Some of these girls are in your families. Some of these girls are here right now. What would Jesus be like for these victims of an immoral society? He would be warm, loving, and He would become a baby for them to hold and rock. And in fact, He did. He did become a baby not just for these suffering girls, but for all of us, and particularly for all who hurt. He became a baby for us to hold and rock and love and gaze at and wonder at and realize that, perhaps, after all, all is well in this dark old world of ours. When we hold Him, when we treasure the Presence of God as one of us, the Gift of Christmas, we begin to see clearly. And the Divine Starlight shines through the darkness.

It seems everything goes wrong, people are in sour moods. They want to throw up their hands. Silence follows, they look at each and say simultaneously, "Long walk - part of gift." God wants to give you and me a gift - the greatest gift imaginable: his very self. He went to the trouble of creating the universe - billions of galaxies each with billions of stars. And our own planet with beautiful rivers, mountains and animals. And he has given us fellow humans in dazzling variety. Even though history shows we have not received these gifts gratefully, still God persists. He makes the long journey to become one of us - accepting, even embracing, our anguish and suffering. Why? (pause - look directly) Long walk - part of gift.

I conclude this Christmas homily with Matthew Kelly's words on why we need gratitude: "Without gratitude what was extraordinary yesterday becomes ordinary today. Without gratitude a sense of entitlement takes over and begins to rot our soul. Without gratitude we get old and grumpy, or even young and grumpy. Gratitude keeps us young. It anchors us to the present moment. It reminds us what matters most and what matters least, and fills us with the resolve to carry out the great mission God has entrusted to us." Amen.

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