

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Dec 29th 2017

John doesn't mince words in his epistle – don't be a hypocrite. If you say you are following Christ, but you are not living His commandments, then you are not in union with Him. If you say you love your sister, but you do not help her, you are “still in the darkness.” You might say you love your brother and sister, but how do you act?

It is interesting that the epistle excerpt omits verses 1 & 2, which in substance say – don't sin. But if you do sin, know that Jesus has expiated your sins. And verse 3 reminds us how we can know Jesus is to keep His commandments.

Luke's gospel relates a time when the young Jesus is in temple for a ritual act. This purification for the mother and consecration of the oldest son, as stipulated in Exodus, were normal acts of faith in the Jewish tradition. The mother needed to undergo the ritual purification following pregnancy and birth, and the eldest son was to be consecrated to the Lord. Luke is reminding his readers, and us, that Jesus and His family were clearly Jewish and followers of the rules that bound all Jewish people in their faith tradition.

I think we can get caught up in celebrating the birth of Jesus and forget some important additional events. First, we still have a compact with God in which we need to follow rules. The rules shifted a bit with Jesus, from the rigorous precepts that had evolved over the centuries in applying the faith of Abraham and Moses, to a more direct manifestation of love for God through love of neighbor. Another way to think about this is a shift from a “don't do that” approach to a “go help – do” approach. For those who are fans of the “Star Wars” movies, when Yoda is teaching Luke to use the force, he famously says “Do or not do. There is no try.” So, for a follower of Jesus, do or not do is certainly implied by John's letter.

A second significant event in Jesus' early life is Simeon's prophecies. Here a most holy man acknowledges Jesus as the Christ. Simeon also foretells (without being specific) the contradictory nature of what Jesus will bring to His ministry, and predicts that Mary herself will feel pain from this ministry. Jesus, as we know, will not be the leader the people had been praying for over the centuries. Mary too will have difficulty understanding her son and His role, and will suffer as only a mother can as He is misunderstood, ridiculed and crucified.

The readings today, then, are good reminders that as important as the birth of Jesus is for us (it is always hard for me to wrap my mind around the fact that God took on human form to live among us!), it is also important that we love as Jesus loved. And we need to constantly discern what it is He calls us to do – not what we anticipate or think from our background, like the Jews did when He lived, but what we hear in the quiet of our hearts as His call to follow Him.

And so my prayer today is for the grace of quiet discernment and the strength to do.

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