

CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY

“Nothing Out of the Ordinary”

(Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-16)

What words best describe Christmas? Humble faith? Immense hope? Great joy? Endless Peace? Perhaps all of these?

I would like to add two other perhaps shocking words: *Ordinariness* and *Poverty*. These two words convey at a very deep level, the meaning of Christmas.

My brothers and sisters – recognize Jesus in your poverty and ordinariness.

Recently I read the book *Mother Theresa - Come Be My Light* by Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk M.C. In this book he shares with the world the letters and correspondence of this extraordinary woman known as the “Saint of Calcutta” for her ministry among the destitute and dying poor of India. Fr. Brian writes that one of the striking things about Mother Theresa as she began her new order *The Missionaries of Charity* was her insistence on Absolute Poverty. In her words, “By Absolute Poverty I mean real and complete poverty – not starving – but wanting – just only what the real poor have – to be really dead to all that the world claims for its own.” The reason that she gives for this strict observance of poverty is because Jesus had asked her for “Nuns covered with my poverty of the Cross.”

In her strong faith and love for God, Mr. Theresa wanted to be like Jesus who was born into a poor family and in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn. The God who is born into our world is born into a world that has no room for him.

It is still the same today. Our society at this moment is trying to take Christ out of Christmas with “holiday trees” and “happy holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas”. The pace of our own lives can be so busy, that we don’t have time for prayer, worship, a sincere confession, perhaps even each other at this time of year. Our priorities get lost and we get distracted and confused.

Because our world is so selfish, sinful, in love with power, wealth and status, Jesus must come into it uninvited. Because Jesus is meek, gentle, forgiving and pure love, just the opposite of what the world wants, he cannot be at home in this world. Yet as God he must be in it, so his place is with the others for whom there is no room – the poor, the discredited, those who are marginalized as persons.

That is a message our culture doesn’t want to hear, but needs to hear. The poor more easily make a place for God in their lives. Their stables and mangers are more available for God’s birth than our hotels, boardrooms, casinos, bingo palaces and extravagant homes filled with our status symbols.

In our lives and in our world, so often, there is no room at the inn, no place to welcome God who wants to be born in it. As it was at the first Christmas, the Christ child today must be born outside our cities, among the poor. So, to find him ourselves, we must let

ourselves be led by the poor, the children, our own brokenness and poverty, to the mangers in our world today.

The second reading speaks of “he who will redeem us from our iniquity”. One of the best ways for us to meet Jesus is to do just that - let him redeem us - save us from our sins. We do that best by celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation – going to confession. There we face our poverty, our sin; we name it, share it and receive his transforming forgiveness. That is the best way to prepare for, and even experience, the joy of Christmas personally, as the joy of forgiveness, before we celebrate it at Christmas time ritually and liturgically as we are doing now.

Another striking characteristic of Mother Theresa was humility, her desire to be hidden, to not seek attention, to be ordinary, to avoid the spotlight. She asked that her letters be kept secret and burned after she died, even as she realized that some would have to be kept for a historical record. Those in charge of her affairs, however, realized that the world needed to hear about this extraordinary woman who thought herself nothing out of the ordinary. And now we learn from her letters a tremendous spiritual lesson – that God works in the dryness and ordinariness of daily life, not necessarily in sensational and spectacular ways. People thought that this woman, who was so close to God, must be experiencing visions and spiritual highs as a matter of course. Her letters reveal just the opposite – she emerges as a classic mystic whose inner life burned with charity but whose heart was tested and purified by an intense trial of dryness in prayer and an apparent absence of God for over fifty years – a true dark night of the soul.

That too, is the message of Christmas. Christmas is nothing out of the ordinary. After the birth of Christ, we need not look to the extraordinary, the spectacular or the miraculous to find God. God is found where we live – in our kitchens, at our tables, in our wounds, and in each other’s faces. That is what Mother Theresa experienced and lived fully, in faith.

This is hard to believe and has always been hard to accept. When Jesus was on earth, virtually no one believed that he was the Messiah, precisely because he was so ordinary, so unlike what they imagined God to be. They had expected a superstar, a king, someone who would turn the world rightfully upside down. Preaching meekness, gentleness and unconditional love, Jesus did not live up to those false expectations.

It is interesting that the bible does not tell us what Jesus looked like, nor even if he had any outstanding psychological traits. In terms of appearance, he was too ordinary, not worth describing, nothing out of the ordinary. He looked like everyone else. Even after the resurrection, he is mistaken for a gardener, a cook, a traveler.

Things haven’t changed much in two thousand years. Seldom does Jesus meet our expectations today. We are still often looking for him beyond the ordinary, beyond the gardener, the neighbor, the stranger, trying to find a miraculous Christ. We go to places where he might be appearing, or where his mother might be shedding tears, yet we pass by and ignore the tears shed at our own breakfast table. We are intrigued by the wounds of a Padre Pio, yet we fail to pay attention to the wounds of those we hurt in our own family, or even to our own emotional or moral wounds.

We look for Christ everywhere, except where he is to be found – in the ordinary - right around us, in our families, community and workplaces, in our own healing journeys, where the incarnation took place – in our flesh.

St. John of the Cross puts it this way:

“God has spoken so completely through his own Word that he chooses to add nothing. He spoke partially through the prophets, but has now said everything in Christ. Anyone seeking some new vision or revelation from him would commit an offense, for instead of focusing his eyes entirely on Christ he would desire something other than Christ, or beyond him. Fix your eyes on Christ alone for in him all is revealed and in him you will find more than you could ever ask for or desire.”

Love is a thing that happens in ordinary places – in kitchens, at tables, in bedrooms, in workplaces, in families, in the flesh. God abides in us when we also abide there. Through the Incarnation, God crawls into ordinary life and invites us to meet him there, in our own poverty and the poverty of those around us.

Flor MCarthy shares an interesting insight. The shepherds returned to their lowly work and obscure life. Nothing had changed yet everything had changed. Life went on as before but with one major difference: now their hearts were filled with wonder. They now had a new vision, a new hope, a new sense of the love of God for them and of his presence with them. Their lives, which a short while ago were dim, now glowed with new meaning. The old world had become like a new country where everything glistened with marvel. Our challenge is to find that newness in the ordinariness of our lives.

My mother had Alzheimer’s disease for years before she died. She did not know who I was. I would relate to her by feeding her. I needed her poverty, her brokenness, because I was too busy, too efficient. To relate to her I had to slow down and feed her, and there I found Christ – feeding my own mother and getting in touch with my own mortality.

The Eucharist we celebrate tonight is another powerful hint at this mystery – Christ is found in the poor and the ordinary. These poor, ordinary gifts of bread and wine will be transformed, through the prayer and faith of the presider and the community, into the Body and Blood of Christ. If we receive them with repentant, humble faith, then we are transformed into the Body of Christ, sent to be light to the world.

So, may our faith and our celebration of Christ’s birth tonight, help us to recognize and experience Christ who is born into our poverty and our ordinariness. Christmas is about being poor enough to recognize our need for Jesus, and nothing out of the ordinary.

May God bless us all with his forgiveness and healing; his peace and joy, this Christmas and throughout the New Year.