

Christmas Homily 2013

Introduction: The Post-Christmas “Blues”

At the risk of getting everyone upset, I'd like to bring up an unpleasant topic. Yes, at the very pinnacle of the Christmas season, when we're all in church, when families are together and gifts are being given, when Christmas lights shine most brightly, and yuletide joy is overflowing, I'd like to mention the post-Christmas blues. What are they? They're that empty, sinking feeling so many of us get when Christmas is over. The holiday parties have run their course, the credit card bills have come in, the Christmas decorations are coming down, we're feeling tired, we've gained 5 lbs., it's back to business as usual and everything seems to be falling apart.

We've all been there. I know I have. Every year when I go to the office on January 2nd, there seems to be some big problem on my plate. Maybe it's a valued employee who decided to seek another opportunity. Maybe it's a personnel issue, a financial worry, or something completely unexpected. Even before the feast of the Epiphany is celebrated, it often seems as though my Christmas bubble bursts. And over the years, how many people have told me something similar. One parishioner some years ago put it this way: "I feel so down in January that I almost wish Christmas never came."

Guidance from St. Ignatius of Loyola

If you've ever had that experience, you are in good company. The story is told of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, who lived back in the 16th century. St. Ignatius began his life not as a religious but rather as soldier. Along the way, he was seriously injured and found himself recuperating in a castle. Since there was no internet or cable TV back in the 16th century, St. Ignatius whiled away the time by reading. The choice of reading in this particular castle, however, was fairly limited. He could either read about the adventures of other soldiers like himself or else he could read about the lives of the saints - he read both.

Being a thoughtful man, he reflected on what he had read. Later on, Ignatius reported that when he read about the exploits of soldiers, he experienced a lot of enjoyment - but after he put that book down, he felt sort of empty inside. His enjoyment, his excitement quickly faded and really didn't mean much. That book

only gave him temporary satisfaction. But when he read the lives of the saints, Ignatius had a different experience. He found their lives just as exciting and captivating as those of soldiers. (Whatever book of the lives of the saints he had, it must have been a page-turner!) What's more, when he put that book down, he continued to enjoy what he had read. The lives of the saints inspired him and gave him a feeling of lasting satisfaction.

Two Ways to Celebrate Christmas

So let me submit that, the problem with Christmas isn't Christmas. The problem has to do with how we celebrate Christmas. Now, don't get me wrong; I don't belong to the "bah-humbug" party that opposes Christmas gifts, parties, trees, lights and mistletoe. But there are two ways of celebrating Christmas roughly comparable to the two experiences of St. Ignatius of Loyola - one of temporary satisfaction and the other of lasting satisfaction. Let's briefly compare and contrast these two ways of celebrating Christmas.

First, we can use Christmas merely as a break in the action. School's out and many people have time off from work, so they are free to shop, party, decorate, visit, and overindulge in food and drink. But some people take this a step further. They use Christmas celebrations to "medicate" their unhappy feelings about life, or to ward off their anxiety, or just to put their problems in brackets. If we take this approach, then we will surely be dealing with the post-Christmas blues. Instead of lasting joy, we will have a pile of bills, more broken relationships, and, of course, that empty, sinking feeling in the first few days of the New Year.

If that isn't for you, then let's consider celebrating Christmas in another way. In this alternative way of celebrating Christmas, we may still shop, give gifts, go to parties, decorate, visit friends and family, as well as eat and drink good things - but with this one critical, life-changing difference: We will let ourselves see in the face of the newborn Savior an invitation to begin afresh, to take stock of what is really most important in our lives, especially our relationship with God, with loved ones, with friends, and even enemies. We will give ourselves permission to hear Joseph and Mary knocking at the door of our hearts; and instead of telling them that there's no room in the inn, we will decide to open wide our hearts to Jesus and make him our welcome guest, ...not just at Christmas but all time, good days, bad days, routine

days. We will let ourselves listen to the announcement of the angels of the birth of Christ, and realize that that announcement is meant for us, personally. "He loves me and he gave himself for me!" St. Paul someplace exclaims.

In his beautiful new exhortation entitled *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis says this: "The Gospel offers us the chance to live life on a higher plane ..." What does it mean to live our lives on a higher plane? Living life on a higher plane doesn't mean being above the fray or imagining ourselves better than the general run of people. It means experiencing at long last in our daily lives the profound truth that we are loved by God, deeply and personally loved, so much so that God's Son became a child, a helpless baby, so that his love would not be far off but accessible to you and to me. Living life on a higher plane means that right now, in whatever situation we find ourselves, whether we are well along the road to holiness or hesitating to enter it, whether we are part of the Church or alienated from the Church, living a good life or snared in some sin we wish we would have never heard of we can this (night) (day) know and believe that God really does love us. His love is for real. It's not merely an idea or a message. It's not a mere ethical choice. It's a Person: Jesus, the Son of God made man.

Overcoming Obstacles

I think many people would like to open their hearts to Christ. I think many people would love to return to the active practice of their faith. Certainly Pope Francis has managed in a very short time to capture the world's attention and to win a fresh hearing of the Gospel. But sometimes people hesitate because they don't see the Christian life as a source of lasting joy and satisfaction but rather as a life full of one impossible moral demand after another.

Yes, the Gospel makes moral demands on us and the Church's teaching reflects this. But let's not put the horse before the cart. Let yourself be loved by God and love God in return. Let the Holy Spirit take you to the heart of the Gospel - 'God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son ...' Once you, we, have fallen in love with God, we will find our lasting joy and satisfaction in letting his love shape our daily lives. Then when Christmas rolls around this same time next year, it will find us (in the words of Bl. John Henry Newman), "more humble, more holy, more affectionate, more resigned, more happy, more full of God."

May you and yours have a blessed Christmas filled with lasting joy!