

Christmas Mass 2014

Introduction

As a young priest I served as priest-secretary for Cardinal James Hickey, then the Archbishop of Washington. In that position, he was required to travel quite a bit & I enjoyed travelling with him. As it turned out, I didn't have to join the Navy to see the world!

On one occasion the Cardinal was invited to Sydney, Australia for meetings and talks. I was very excited about the prospect of going there but I had no idea how long the trip was and how severe the jet lag would be. It was early morning when the two of us arrived at the hotel and we were exhausted. "Boy, it'll be good to take a nap," I said to the Cardinal as I stepped up to the desk to register us for our rooms at the hotel in Sydney. The clerk smiled at the two weary travelers and said our rooms wouldn't be ready until 3:00 p.m. It was a long way to Sydney, only to be told there was no room at the inn, at least not for a long while.

No Room at the Inn

Tonight/today, however, we celebrate a far longer journey. The coming of the Son of God to earth took centuries and he traveled the uneven terrain of human history. Indeed, the Lord elected to travel by way of the history of the Chosen People. Along the way, He spoke to them through prophets, priests and kings. His coming was furthered by the witness of Israel's holy women and men but also impeded by the betrayal, infidelity, and folly of the human race. It is a journey that led through the Red Sea, across the desert to the Promised Land, then onto exile in Babylonia and finally to the experience of being conquered by the superpowers of the day, the last of which was the Roman Empire.

The first Christmas night marked the last leg of that journey which began with the dawn of creation. The Virgin is with Child. Mary and Joseph are making their way to Bethlehem to register for the census decreed by the Emperor, Caesar Augustus. It is cold and dark, and the hour is late. When it is time for the Incarnate Son of God to be born, there is no room for him, no room in the inn. It's not as if his room isn't quite ready; *there is no room*. As his long and tortuous journey through time and space reaches its destination the only place for the Lord is a crude stable, scarcely

fit for animals. Let not the starlit sky and choir of angels lead us to believe that the cave and the manger are anything other than abject poverty. Thus it comes to pass: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

Making Room for Christ in Our Hearts

And we may say, “How could that innkeeper turn away a mother with Child and her husband with worry written all over his face?” Yet now, dear friends, we have to face the same question as the innkeeper.

For the Lord’s journey was not finished when he arrived at Bethlehem. Though he is near us, indeed with us, the Word made flesh must still travel through the highways and byways of every human heart—mine and yours; every human heart is a destination for Jesus, the Son of God made man. Yet, “More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy,” Jeremiah writes, “Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). Crowded out by our sins, our worries, our complex and self-centered motivations, we may well have said to the Word made flesh when at last he arrived on the doorstep of our hearts: “There is no room at the inn.” “Go elsewhere.” Or, “Come back tomorrow!”

If we would experience any measure of joy this Christmas, it will be because we decided not to resist the Word made flesh but rather to make room for the Lord and welcome him into our hearts. It will be because we’ve allowed ourselves to pay attention to the many times when God tugs at our hearts, telling us that life is more, much more, than our daily routine and that we are more than the sum of our sins and failings. It will be because at last Love has found us, the Love of God in the flesh, that all-encompassing Love that gives our lives joy and meaning.

We hesitate to open the door of our hearts and welcome the Christ Child because we recognize that, if we do, our hearts will change, and change radically, just the way a household changes when a new baby enters the scene. The house has to be made clean. Things have to be rearranged. Schedules change. So too when Jesus comes, our hearts need to be cleansed of our sins and our priorities have to change, especially the tendency to put ourselves first. What’s more, if we admit this Child into our hearts, they will have to be enlarged; they will have to be large enough also to welcome those whom this Child loves – his mother Mary, his foster-father Joseph,

the angels, shepherds, and kings, but also the poor and the vulnerable, the unwanted and the unloved, as well as those whom we may now regard as our implacable enemies. No wonder we hesitate. But we mustn't. Now is the time to welcome him.

It's true: we must welcome him into our hearts but we must also welcome him into our *homes*. To reach our homes, the newborn Savior travels the way of our family relationships – the mutual love of husband and wife and their love for their children. If love is lacking, the journey of the Word made flesh may take longer but make no mistake he is at our doorstep seeking to come in from the cold. And just as a newborn child changes a household, so too the Newborn Savior seeks to strengthen and transform family life. Coming into our homes as the very incarnation of God's love and mercy, Jesus will seek to make our homes warm places of love, joy, forgiveness, and friendship, where the faith is passed from one generation to the next and where young people acquire the virtues and values that will enable them to grow in age, wisdom, and grace, just as Jesus did.

Making Room for Christ in Our Churches

And there is one other place where we must make more room for the Lord – and that is our churches, all the churches of this Archdiocese of Baltimore. It's not that we are lacking seats for those who wish to attend Sunday Mass; Lord only knows we have more than enough seating capacity in our churches. What I mean is that our church communities must open their hearts as never before in welcome of the Newborn Savior, by encountering him in prayer, by experiencing his presence in our midst, by worshipping him in spirit and truth, by bearing witness to him in daily life. And in welcoming Christ and bearing witness to his Presence, we will become the inn that warmly welcomes everyone without exception— the inn where men and women who are estranged from God and the Church experience the joy of the Gospel, the healing of their wounds, and blessing of serving others in their need.

Conclusion

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock," Jesus says to us in the Book of Revelation. He is knocking at the door of our hearts, the door of our homes, and the door of our churches. This Christmas may there ample room at the inn for the Child who is God from God, light from light, true God from true God!

May He bless us in his love, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!