

The Archbishop's Christmas Homily

Christmas Homily 2015

I. Introduction

Let me begin with words of welcome.

Christmas is one of those occasions when churches are filled to overflowing. Some of you are here at Mass almost every Sunday and some of you are here, well, less regularly.

Whatever your situation, I'm glad you are here to celebrate the Lord's birth. We have gathered this Christmas during the Year of Mercy which Pope Francis has called for in his pastoral love for all of us.

My earnest prayer on the Feast of Christmas is just this:

that somehow, in spite of my weakness and unworthiness, something I might say about the birth of Jesus and perhaps the way in which I offer this Holy Mass may point far beyond myself and touch your souls with the Lord's mercy, peace, and joy.

I pray for myself and for you that our celebration of the Lord's birth may lead us to a new birth of faith, hope, and love in our daily lives.

II. Christmas Is for Children

All of us know that Christmas is for children. Most of us adults enjoy watching the little ones enjoy this special season, our children, grandchildren, our nieces and nephews. This is especially true of really young children who are just becoming aware of the Christmas trees, presents, the cookies, and all the celebrations that are part of this very special time of year. They may be a bit wound up and they may not sleep as long as we'd like but there's something wonderful when their eyes light up upon finding that special gift meant just for them under the Christmas tree.

As our families enjoy celebrating Christmas together we also think of those families and young people who are less fortunate, not only economically but in so many other ways. Let us be close to them spiritually not only in our prayers but also in our

generosity. During the past few weeks, I've had the privilege of distributing winter coats to young people from underserved neighborhoods and families in need, courtesy of the Knights of Columbus here in Maryland. Although the warm weather really hasn't yet called for a winter coat, I can tell you how much joy I felt when I helped these young people pick out the coat they liked and try it on for size.

Afterwards, I received many notes from the young people who received the coats. One of them wrote:

"Thanks for the coat, Archbishop, but I'm sorry I don't have anything to give you." Oh, but she's wrong. She gave me more joy than ever she will know!

III. Christ Is for a Child

If Christmas is for children, it is all about one very special Child. If our children give us joy, this Child came into the world to make us supremely happy. This special Child is Jesus who is both Son of God and Son of Mary. When you stop and pray at the crèche, please do take a moment to reflect on the immense love that is portrayed in that tender scene of Christ's birth.

In the beginning there was only God. But the God who existed from all eternity was not only a loving God but a God who is love itself. We may find it hard to understand the mystery of the Trinity but suffice it to say that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share a love that goes beyond anything we could ever imagine. God wanted to share the gift of his love with us and ultimately that is why we exist. Something deep inside of us, whether we admit it or not, is longing for God's love. In fact, nothing in this world will satisfy the longings of our hearts except God's love.

God not only created the world but he sent many signals that he wanted to share his love with us and that he wanted our love in return. God chose a people all his own and he sent "prophets, seers, and sages" to tell us of his love and along the way he performed signs and wonders that displayed his love. Many of his signals we missed. Some of them we rejected. God could have given up on us – but he didn't. Instead, he came in Person. God the Father sent us His Son born as helpless baby in crude manger in a stable meant for animals. Yes there were angels and the sky was lit with God's glory but let us make no mistake: this Child was born, as helpless as any baby

we've ever seen, into the depths of our human poverty, physical, economic, and above all spiritual.

Why would God make himself so small, so vulnerable, so poor? The answer is simple: God loves us and wants to make himself accessible to us. If he had come in power and might and majesty, we might be afraid of him. He might win our grudging allegiance but not our love. In his mercy God sent his Son, born as a child, to touch our hearts, to warm them, to melt away our unbelief.

All he is asking is that the barriers to his love come down – whatever they may be – whatever it is that we say or do to keep God at bay in our daily lives. What's more, God isn't even asking us to tear down those barriers by ourselves. Jesus came to do that for us if only we would allow him to do so. The words of Bl. Mother Theresa – soon to be St. Mother Teresa come to mind: "Give God permission," she said, "Give God permission to enter your hearts!" That is what the Child in the manger wants for his birthday – an invitation to enter our hearts there to transform them with his love and mercy.

IV. "Unless You Become Like Children..."

How then to celebrate this feast of Christmas spiritually? How do you and I get the most out of this feast that was meant for children? Can indeed this day of Christ's birth really penetrate our shopworn hearts? Jesus gave us the key to celebrating his own birthday. When his followers asked Jesus who is the greatest in God's Kingdom, he called over a child and placed the child in their midst and said: "Amen, I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 18:3).

Becoming like little children has nothing to do with turning back the hands of time and still less with trading in whatever maturity we've acquired for childishness. No, becoming like little children has to do with our having a heart like Christ's, a heart that is meek and mild, a heart that is merciful and trusting. Experience teaches us, however, that we cannot remake our hearts simply by willing to do so. Rather, "[t]he Child comes to make us children" (A. Esolen, *Magificat Year of Mercy Companion*, p. 27). All we have to do is give the Lord permission to enter our hearts each day, and

through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to make them young again—‘younger than sin’!

What happens when we allow the Lord to restore the joy of our youth? A heart that is meek and mild, full of mercy and trust looks at the world differently. Suddenly we find ourselves thinking no longer of ourselves but of those around us. Overtaken by God’s merciful love, we suddenly want to share that love with others, especially the poor, the sick, the stranger, the imprisoned. Not only will we find ourselves much more inclined to practice our faith, we’ll also want to bring our faith, as Pope Francis says, to the margins of society – to those who are nobodies in the eyes of the world but precious in the sight of God.

V. Conclusion

...And one more thing...

Before our eyes at this very Mass the Lord will once again make himself small as bread and wine are transformed in the power of the Holy Spirit into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. Isn’t it clear?

We have not come in search of the Lord. No, he’s come in search of us! “Behold,” he says, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). Come, let us welcome him! Come, let us adore him!