

## CHRISTMAS DAY A 2010

“Today is born our savior, Christ the Lord.” It’s the Feast of the Incarnation or the Feast of the Nativity. We have been waiting for this day since the beginning of Advent four weeks ago. We have been preparing in a variety of ways to celebrate the birth of our Lord: making lists, checking them twice, shopping, waiting in line whether at the post office, book store, grocery store and other places, and we hope we have taken the time to prepare our hearts to be a manger to receive him in again. We wait expectantly for Jesus to be reborn in us each year. Mary also waited from the time God’s angel visited her with the unusual news that she would bear God’s Son. It was as if God had said, “Mary, would you be my mother?” We know that she said yes and for nine months she waited. She said she would be willing to help fulfill the prophecy that a young woman would bear a child and name him Immanuel – which means “God with us”. And Joseph waited with her. As Fr Carlson reminded us last week, Joseph is sometimes the guy in the background. Both he and Mary must have wondered what would happen after this child appeared. Whatever would happen, they believed that God was with them.

The Messiah came into the world in humble circumstances. Nothing extraordinary about it – except that this child was God’s Son, which is as extraordinary as it gets. He was God Incarnate – God in flesh and blood - and Mary was his mother. How this can be is beyond our comprehension, because this child was completely and perfectly human and completely and perfectly divine. It is absolute mystery. We can’t explain it, we simply thank God for his gift to us. It’s the best gift anybody could get.

He came to live among us for a time to make some changes in the way God’s people lived and loved. They were not treating each other with the kind of love with which God had created everything. The only way God could right the wrongs in the world was to come to earth and spread around Love. The world has never been the same because Love came down at Christmas. God came down at Christmas. Jesus came down at Christmas. Whether we say God or Jesus or Love came down at Christmas, it is all the same. Because of this, we are saved. We heard it in the second reading from Titus just a few minutes ago: “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy.” The mercy of God is as incomprehensible as is the birth of God’s Son. It is a gift beyond compare, that God loves us so much that his anointed one came to live with us for a while. He was the promised one - the Messiah. He would be the savior of the world. But he didn’t think or act like the savior in the minds of the people he came to be with. They were looking for a military figure who would overthrow the Romans and rule from a throne. He had a different way to save the world

And so people wondered, “What child is this?” Who is this Jesus? All during his ministry on earth, people asked, “Who is this man?”, for he acted like no king or savior would if he was the one who would save them. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote this about him in her book Religious Studies: “If we should embody our idea of the Son with whom Mary lived in secure intimacy for thirty years, we should call him LOVE itself. He was not merely lovely, but he was love. He had a warming, creative power as to love. He gave birth to a new conception of love, to a fervor, a devotion, a tenderness, of which before the human soul scarcely knew its own capacity.” Jesus was a humble man, and he taught that it is better to treat others with love than with swords.

It is better to change hearts and, with humility, serve the poor, the lonely, the sick, the weak, and those on the fringes of society. When hearts are changed, the ills of the world will change. So, he came to minister to those who needed him, who needed to know about love, who needed someone to love them no matter who they were. Remember that it was the shepherds who were the first to know about his birth. They were considered lowly and outcasts. Yet, they got the Good News first. I can't even imagine their astonishment when an angel of the Lord stood before them and announced the birth of the Messiah. It would have been even more astonishing to see and hear the heavenly host singing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." Only the love of God could make such a thing happen. All through his life, Jesus ministered to others by turning the usual - upside down at great personal risk. And, we know the outcome of that. Another astounding gift of Love.

The angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth *peace* among those whom he favors." Jesus was born in a time of strife and oppression and darkness for ordinary people. The Roman rule was oppressive. There are many places in the world today that are just like that still. Into that world he came, and the world was changed. Many here may not feel very peaceful because of things happening in their lives over which they have no control. For many, personal losses and grief, the uncertainty of their jobs, or health conditions, or war in other countries or on our streets raises anxiety levels. It does not sound very peaceful. So how do we reconcile what the angels proclaimed with how things really are? It sounds like a contradiction.

The peace God means for us is something internal, not external, although it sure would be much nicer to live if all around us peace prevailed. The peace the angels announced is much deeper than that. It has to do with what is in our hearts. And that is where Jesus longs to be - in our hearts, and it is our hearts that Jesus changes so we can make a difference in the wrongs of the world. This is the Lord's peace. It is another gift.

Gifts. The giving and receiving of gifts is one of the lovely parts of the Christmas season. It seems to have gotten a bit out of hand lately if one pays attention to the commercial side of this season. Nevertheless, it is a delightful custom, and we try to find just the right thing for everybody on our list. Our Bishop, Jeffrey Lee, in his Christmas message to the Diocese, posed these questions: "What do you want for Christmas? Do you know? What is your heart's desire?" He suggests that most of us really want peace and safety from the ongoing economic hardships, the violence of wars near and far, the ravaging of our environment. He hopes these things are on our Christmas lists. He ends his message saying, "I believe that God has already given us the gifts that we really long for, God has planted the answers to our challenges right here; they are already here in the human heart. The problem is that too many hearts remain cold and closed, shut off from their own needs, desperately trying to fill the emptiness, ease the anxiety, keep the fear at bay with substitutes that will never work. The Christian tradition teaches that inside every human person there is a God-shaped hole; there is a place within each one of us that only God can fill. This Christmas I invite you to open your heart. Let God in on what you really, really want. This Christmas, let God fill you with hope, and life, and peace. As the Christmas carol put it: Let Christ be born in us. Today." AMEN.