

Advent 4. 06

1. All of us need roots. Look at what happens at Thanksgiving and Christmas. People who live far away from parents and siblings struggle to get home to celebrate the holiday with them.

Unfortunately, not everyone has a family to go to, but those of us who do want to be with them. And this is not simply the result of a conscious decision. It is more like an instinct, like birds returning to their nesting grounds each year. As such it is God-given, for God is the author of nature and our instincts are his creation.

2. In this liturgical season we are centered on the Lord's roots. The Church wants to explain to us what they were. Thus she takes a passage from the prophet Micah which speaks of a future messiah or king who will come from Bethlehem, who will be a good shepherd to his flock, whose greatness will reach to the ends of the earth, and who will be peace, and presents it to us so that we may see it as fulfilled in Jesus. In doing this the Church is rooting Jesus in the history of his people. She is giving him his national and religious identity. He is the long-awaited king of Israel who will be a king of peace and whose greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

3. Today's Gospel gives Jesus family roots. We are told about his mother Mary hurrying off to visit her cousin Elizabeth, the wife of the priest Zechariah. So we are looking at a human family. But this family is an extraordinary one, to be sure, for both Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born of a virgin. They root Jesus in God because they want us to understand that he is not ordinary, that he is indeed the Son of God. But they give him a human genealogy as well. Luke writes: "When Jesus began his ministry he was about thirty years of age. He was the son, as was thought, of Joseph" (3:23). And Matthew writes: "Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah" Matthew traces the Lord's family roots back as far as Abraham, thereby giving him his Jewish identity. Luke, on the other hand, goes all the way back to Adam, thereby giving him his human identity.

4. Yes, it is all about roots, ordinary and extraordinary ones. But all of us, besides being rooted in our families, grow up and away and lay down new roots and give ourselves our own identities as adults. So did the Lord. But oftentimes, when we look at a person's life from its end, we find that so much of that end was hinted at its

beginnings. With the Lord that is especially true. He was already identified as the Messiah and as the Son of God in his genealogy and in virgin birth. Now, looking at his life from the end, we see these identities confirmed. But what is new are the details. Yet even here there was one detail that was already prophesized when he was a baby. It is given in Luke's Gospel when his parents take him to the temple and Anna, the prophetess there, tells Mary and Joseph that Jesus is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, that he will be a sign that will be contradicted, and that a sword will pierce his mother's heart. Thus, even in the beginning, when we are not far from Bethlehem, Golgatha is already coming into view. Luke is of course writing after the Lord's death, and therefore he can see his life from that perspective. But he is tracing facts, not fiction. The Lord became all that.

5. We don't usually associate the word sacrifice with Christmas, but there it is in our second reading today from Hebrews which tells us that the life of the Lord was itself the sacrifice which replaced the sacrifices of animals in previous times. Sacrifice in the Lord's life meant the surrendering of his will to the Father. Yes, that surrender will result in a bloody sacrifice of the cross, but in its kernel the sacrifice is the giving over of his will to the Father. That is the sacrifice which his Father asked of him, and that is the

sacrifice which he asks of all of us. And when we make this sacrifice, we root ourselves in God and therefore give ourselves our true identity. For whatever is not God's will for us is false. We uproot ourselves, we give ourselves false identities when we refuse to give ourselves to the will of God as it is manifested to us in the concreteness of our everyday lives. Therefore, as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's birth, let us ask for the grace to be rooted in Christ, that is, in the will of the Father.