

Christmas 09

Nothing that we have done repeatedly over many years can fail to evoke memories in us. So it is with the celebration of Christmas. Maybe we remember the first time when we were allowed to attend Midnight Mass. Maybe we remember a breakfast with family and relatives afterwards. Or we think of the first time that we were allowed to open our presents after Midnight Mass and did not have to wait until the next morning.

Yes, Christmas is the most memorable time of the year, richly filled with memories. Perhaps some of you sitting here are thinking of the Christmases which you celebrated as a child in this church when the Mass was in Latin and the priest faced the wall, when there were perhaps a dozen or more altar boys on the altar. We cherish these good memories and thank the Lord for them. We recall with love the people who shared them with us, especially those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, other members of our families and friends. May they be celebrating with the Lord in the new life to which we all look forward!

And now we celebrate the event which has made all these memories possible, the birth of this one baby in what is today Israel two thousand years ago, Jesus, born, according to our Scriptures, in Bethlehem but raised in the Galilean village of Nazareth. For without him, without his birth, there would be no Christmas, and without Christmas there would never have been all the celebrations which we remember so fondly.

We should all take some time to gaze at the Christmas crib and the baby in it and ask ourselves what his birth, his presence among us, means for us as individuals and for our world. How many people have existed on our planet up till now? I have no idea. I know that we are now about six billion people on the face of the earth, and we keep growing. Indeed, our growth, while at first glance something very positive for it means that there is new life, is also a problem, the scientists tell us, because we are going beyond the number of people whom the earth can sustain. They also tell us that this overtaxing of the planet will happen every more rapidly if the rest of the world begins to live as we here in the USA live and if we, the developed and developing nations, continue to poison the atmosphere and cut down the forests. Yes, we are now at the point where we have to begin to function not just as individuals or even

individual nations but as one world making decisions for the entire planet. That process began after WWII with the establishment of the United Nations. With all its faults this organization is still what we need to move forward. And now the nations are beginning to discuss our future as a planet, as we saw just a week ago at the meeting in Copenhagen in Denmark.

So we are thinking in terms of the entire planet, the home of the human race. In the midst of such thinking can one person matter? Among the billions of people who have existed and who will exist in the future, can one person matter? Yes, yes, yes. For the billions of people who were, who are and who will be have always been and will always be made up of individuals with their individual histories, no two of them being exactly alike. Each stitch of this almost infinite quilt of humanity is unique. And yet some are more identifiable, more known than others, because of the positions they have occupied in life, because of the contributions they have made to the human race and the influence they have exercised upon it.

When we try to identify who these more identifiable, more known people are, our lists may differ. We as Americans would put George Washington and Abraham Lincoln on that list, but someone from Russia or Indonesia would probably not have them

on their lists. But almost everyone would have the great religious figures the world on their list. The Buddhists will have the Buddha on their lists; the Jews will have Abraham and Moses; the Muslims will have Mohammed; we Christians will have Jesus. And all these religions taken together represent most of the people of the world.

In the midst of such human immensity let us gaze again at the crib with Jesus in it and remind ourselves that our world and its history is different because of this one baby. Indeed, as someone wrote recently, the fact that we today are arguing about health care is traceable to this baby. How and why? Because only a society which considers people important would struggle with this issue, and such a society exists because Jesus lived and taught us to love one another, even our enemies. Such a society exists today because for the past two thousand years the Western world has believed that Jesus is God present among us in human life. Our faith has taught us that God became human in Jesus so that we humans could become divine, that is, could begin to live as Jesus lived and therefore as God in human form lived. And so people as a group are important, and each individual is important, is of infinite value and should be provided with all that is necessary to live a truly human life.

And why has God has chosen to identify Himself with us in Jesus of Nazareth? The only explanation possible is that God created human beings precisely in order to be able to become human in Jesus. God loves us so much that He not only wants to share our lives but wants us to be part of His life, and not just for a brief period, the period of our lives here on earth, but forever.

We have much to celebrate. God is among us in Jesus. He has shared our human life. He has taught us how to live here and now. And he promises us a future without end. How can we not be grateful, despite all our hardships and sickness and dark days? God has taken our hand and will not let go of it.

Merry Christmas!