

Christmas Eve – (Year B) – December 24, 2017

IS 62:1-5; PS 89:4-5, 16-17, 27, 29; ACTS 13:16-17, 22-25; MT 1:1-25

It's interesting to compare and contrast the **Christmas Eve Gospel** passage—which we just heard proclaimed—with the **Christmas Day Gospel** passage for this liturgical year because **considering them together** helps reveal the extent of *God's love for us*.

But first, **a word about God's love**...and this is aimed primarily at any **visitors** we have among us, or at **those** who were, perhaps, **raised Catholic** but have **strayed** from the Church.

Here is a true statement: *God is love* (1 Jn 4:9).

Here's another: **God loves you**.

Now, when I was a little kid growing up in the 1970's, I had my fill of sermons that talked about God's love, but which said or did **nothing** for me personally, because they **seemed so remote from real life**. I mean, if my family was struggling...then hearing a priest say, "**God loves you**" *without helping me understand how to bring God's love into the painful situation*, did nothing to make my Catholic faith relevant to my real life. I wanted **more**. I needed **substance**. And touchy-feely preaching left me **hungry** for something more...not to mention a bit **angry** at the letdown.

Even today—as a priest—if I'm going through a tough time and someone says to me, "**It'll be all right...God loves you**", well, with all due respect to that well-intentioned person, that doesn't help me much!

Yes—as a priest—I know it's **true**. God *does* love me—but when I'm hurting, those words can feel more like a **trite cliché** or a **fluffy platitude** than a **solution** or a **support**. For God's love to be real to me—especially when I'm having a tough go of it—I need something more than mere words. I need to **understand** God's love for me, so I can open myself to it...and **experience** it.

So, a **comparison** and **contrast** between the **Christmas Eve Gospel** passage and the Gospel passage for **Christmas Day** can help us better appreciate *the way* God's love affects each of us—in the messy reality of our daily lives.

First, the **Christmas Eve Gospel**.

For this liturgical year, the passage comes from the beginning of **Matthew's Gospel** and details the **genealogy of Jesus** beginning with **Abraham** and proceeding through **42 generations** down to **Joseph**, the foster-father of Jesus.

The Son of God became a real human being in the person of Jesus Christ, coming initially as a **poor, vulnerable baby**. He didn't just **pop** into existence **magically**. He had **real relatives...actual ancestors**...some of whom were good people and some of whom were scoundrels. In other words, he came from a family tree—just like you and me.

What does that tell us?

Well, for starters...**God doesn't love us from a distance**. Rather, **he gets into our mess with us!** So, when the Prophet Isaiah said that the Messiah would be named **Emmanuel**—a name which means "**God with us**"—he really meant **WITH** us. With us in every aspect of human life...with its joys...as well as its sorrows.

In other words, we have a God who actually **understands** us.

The fact that God became human is a big deal. So, big a deal that some people reject Jesus as God precisely **because** he became human. They think that his choice to become human somehow diminishes his power. But if God is really all powerful—as we proclaim he is when we recite the Creed—then **wouldn't he have the power to become human?**

Instead of looking at the **self-imposed limitations** that God accepted when he became human, we should see **love**. But sometimes we can't **see** it because our **sin** not only **blinds us** to genuine love, it also **prevents us** from **receiving** that love. That's why God the Father felt compelled to save us by sending us his Son. God is love, and **genuine love, by definition, wants to give of itself**. But if the intended recipient can't receive that love, then something must be done. Thus, God sent his Son to fix this problem...to rescue us from sin so he could restore us to love.

But, believe it or not, it gets even **better**. God did not **just** come to free us **from** sin and free us **for** love. God came to **change us into something we could not become on our own**.

And that's where the **Christmas Day Gospel** passage comes into play.

Now I'm going to read a good portion of the **Gospel passage from the Christmas Day Mass**. Trust me! It will be worth it to hear the details when you realize what it means for you...**personally!**

Here goes:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God. And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:1-5, 9-14)

So, when we **compare** the two Gospel passages—this passage with the passage of the genealogy of Jesus—we know that the Son of God became flesh and lived among us. In the **genealogy**, we see, specifically, *where* Jesus entered into human history.

But it is in the contrast of the two passages that reveals the extent of God's love for us.

We know that Jesus came to save us from our sins. But we may not have realized that God the Father wants to do **more than save us**. He wants to **adopt us** into his family...to give us a **share in his own nature**—his own **divinity**—just as he took on our humanity.

And this is where it helps to understand something about the Mass. In a few minutes, after the altar is prepared for the **Liturgy of the Eucharist**, the deacon will pour water and wine into the chalice. As he does so, he will say this prayer, silently:

By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

The **water** represents **humanity**—our **human nature**. The **wine** represents **divinity**—**God's nature**. So, the deacon prays that, as the wine and water are mixed as a symbol of sharing their natures with each other, we may allow God to make **us** into what **he** is.

God became **fully** what **we are**, so that we could **share** in what **he is**. This is not something we can **do**. It is only something we can *receive* as a gift. And the Christmas Day Gospel tells us how it is brought about. Listen again to these words:

...to those who did accept [Jesus] he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God. (Jn 1:12-13)

How does this happen?

In the **Sacrament of Baptism!**

When we are baptized, God adopts us into his family and he ceases to be **merely** our **Creator**. *He becomes our Father...and we his beloved sons and daughters!* His Holy Spirit begins to dwell in us, and the more we allow that Spirit to **increase**, and our broken, sinful human nature to **decrease**, the more we experience what we were created for.

And if we fall away from him, God **still** does not abandon us, but reaches out to us *again* to bring us back to him. How does he do this?

In the **Sacrament of Confession.**

When we sin in a big way, the Holy Spirit, who began to live in us at Baptism, departs from our soul. And that's why our sin leaves us **empty**, **dissatisfied** and **alienated** from **others**...from **God**...and even from *ourselves*.

But when we go to Confession, two important things happen.

First, our **sins are forgiven**. Completely forgiven to the extent that we've made a full and honest Confession.

But we are **also filled once again with the Holy Spirit of God** and our broken soul is restored to the beauty it enjoyed the day we were Baptized. Sin is taken away to make space, once again, for the Holy Spirit to dwell in our souls.

But here's the **biggest proof of all** of God's love for us. Not only did the Son of God become human in the person of Jesus Christ and **live** among us. **He goes even further in his love to become our food in the Holy Eucharist.** He gives his priests the power to change mere bread and wine into his Body and Blood so that when we receive him **worthily** in Holy Communion, he not only **dwells among us**—he **lives in us**—in our body and soul.

When we exchange gifts at Christmas, we're simply **symbolizing** the exchange of gifts between God and man—between divinity and humanity.

From Mary, the Son of God received a human body to become what we are.

Through the **Sacraments**—starting with Baptism—Jesus gives us a share of **what he is** so that we can become, little by little—with his love, mercy and grace—what we were created to be in the first place...*partakers in God's own life.*

And the best news of all is that **we don't have to wait for the next life** to begin to **experience** the love that God has for us...and the peace and joy that his love fill us with! When we have experienced even a small taste of God's love for us in the here and now, it changes everything, and all the things we have pursued in search of this kind of love, but which have **inevitably failed to deliver**, suddenly become less and less important to us as we realize **what**...and more importantly, **who**...we were made for.

Whereas the homilies I grew up with felt like they were filled with empty words about God's love, **this homily can actually be put to the test** to see if it delivers on the love it promises.

God made the first move by **coming** to us...by **becoming** one of us.

If we've been away from him, we can come back to him by going to **Confession** and having the pipeline between his heart and ours restored to proper working order.

If you do that much...I assure you...God will take it from there!

And your life will never be the same again.