

Christmas Vigil Mass B/2008

The incarnation of Jesus Christ in the world is one of the greatest events that has changed forever the face of the universe. Before Jesus Christ, and after Jesus Christ, human history is not the same anymore. The readings on this Christmas vigil focus our attention on the birth of Jesus as the celebration of the beginning of our redemption and the fulfillment of God's plan to save the world.

The first reading of the book of Isaiah describes the Jewish historical context that preceded the birth of Jesus. In that time, as the people of Israel came back from exile in Babylon, they were disappointed and discouraged. Everything they planned to do for the reconstruction of the country did not work at all. They came to believe that God had abandoned them forever to their sad fate.

It was in that time that the prophet stood in the midst of his fellow citizens to encourage them to hope in the Lord. Using the metaphoric language of human love, he reassured them that God will reconcile them. They will no more be called "forsaken" or their land "desolate". Instead they will be given a new name and be called "my delight", for their land will be espoused by the Lord. Since God will find his joy in them, they will be a glorious crown and a royal diadem in the hand of the Lord.

This prophecy, however, did not come to be realized immediately. Time and time again Israel went on sinning and abandoned the ways of the Lord. Time and time again God punished them by way of exiles. However, in spite of all that, the promise of one day seeing God's promise realized did not die with the time. Many in Israel hoped again and over again that God would intervene and save them.

The text of St Paul we heard reminds of that hope that guided the people of Israel through the meandering of history. All through the difficult situations they went, Israel never lost its hope: from the choice of their ancestors, their sojourn in Egypt, the installation of David as king, the proclamation of the baptism of repentance by John, to Jesus. They believed that as God saved them in the past, he was able to do the same thing in the future. For St Paul, Jesus is the awaited savior. He is the fulfillment of the promise made to David to make one of his descendants the savior of Israel.

Because Jesus is the promised and awaited savior, the Gospel gives us the book of his genealogy that goes from Abraham to Joseph and explains how his birth took place in a miraculous way through the action of the Holy Spirit. The point of Matthew in constructing this genealogy is, in fact, to tell us that Jesus is the son of God; he is a true descendant of David and Abraham.

Matthew builds the genealogy in three sections, each with fourteen generations of people in between. The first section goes from Abraham to David; the second from David to the exile in Babylon; and the third from the return from Babylon to Jesus. With this arrangement, Matthew intends to tell us that Jesus is the most perfect of all God's creatures. In him, God wants to achieve the harmony and the perfection he intended in his creation from all eternity.

First of all, we know that Abraham was the founding father of Israel and of the believers. We also know that David was the greatest of the kings of Israel. By linking Jesus to these great figures of Israel, Matthew would like to tell us that in Jesus we

have the greatest of the gifts God can give to the world. Therefore, Jesus is not anybody, but the one in whom we have access to God in a unique way. In that sense, Christmas becomes the feast of God's gift to the world and the celebration of our grandeur and our dignity as sons and daughters of God.

Second, for many Jews, the experience of exile in Babylon was often interpreted as the result of the sin of the people. By invoking this negative experience of Israel, Matthew wants to present Jesus as the one who comes to restore the dignity of God's children destroyed by sin. In that sense, Christmas is the celebration of the generosity of God who did not want human history to end in tragedy. God sends his son in order to rescue us from the morass of sin and to break the chain of evil. This benefice is given to all those who accept Jesus, change their lives and believe in him. That is the challenge of Christmas.

Another point is the inclusion in Jesus genealogy of women, of whom some were foreigners and others less recommendable. This mention is astonishing for a society that was exclusively patriarchal. In fact, the point of Matthew is to say that with Jesus all the barriers that divide people disappear. There is no more distinction between Jewish and Gentiles, man and woman; we are all God's children. In that sense, Christmas is the celebration of our becoming God's children in Jesus.

What is the meaning of Christmas? Christmas is the feast of the loving exchange between God and humanity. It is the celebration of the mystery of his coming into our world and his dwelling among us. By becoming a man, God gives us human beings access to his divinity in a more tangible way than before. From now on, we know that God is at the heart of our world; he is involved in our history and in our lives. He is our partner forever. Our history becomes his history; our life becomes his life, and our concerns become his concerns. We cannot celebrate Christmas and overlook that God is sharing with us our victories and our defeats, our successes and our failures, our joys and our sufferings.

Christmas reminds us that we have to live not only according to human patterns, but also according to God's law. Anytime we try to separate God and human being, the divine and the human, we overlook the truth that God has become one of us to make us divine. Christmas reminds us that human fate and God's destiny are inseparable. There is no true humanity without worship of God; there is no true worship without the service of our fellow humans. The service of our fellow humans loses its meaning when it is not founded on the love God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Let us rejoice in this feast of our salvation with all men and women of good will. Let us call upon Jesus to bring peace to our world. Let us not miss the opportunity to make him our savior and Lord. Peace to you with whom we gather tonight; peace to your families and those you love in your hearts. God bless you all!

Isaiah 62, 1-5; Acts of Apostles 13, 16-17, 22-25; Matthew 1, 1-25



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