

Christmas Vigil Mass B/2011

The readings of this Christmas Eve invite us to celebrate the birth of Jesus as the beginning of our redemption. They also enjoin us to see in the birth of Jesus the fulfillment of God's plan to save the world.

The first reading describes the work of the prophet Isaiah in the midst of the people of Israel in the aftermath of their exile from Babylon. As it was perceived at that time, his work included prayer and intercession for the people, especially in their times of trouble.

That is exactly what Isaiah does here in expressing his confidence in the saving power of God. Nothing will stop him from pleading unceasingly until he sees the victory of Jerusalem. Because, the victory is at hand, all the nations will see the vindication of God and all the kings his glory. Jerusalem will receive a new name pronounced by God himself. Never will Israel be called again forsaken or desolate, but rather "My Delight", because God will espouse his land forever.

What is behind this text is the idea that whatever might be the suffering of God's people, it will not endure eternally. On the contrary, God will intervene and put an end to it. Another idea is the fact that God in his faithfulness will never abandon his people, but rather he will keep his promise and save them.

It is this prospect of God's faithfulness and primary intention of saving his people that leads us to Jesus Christ. In fact, over the years and through the meander of history, as Israel went from one exile to another, the people kept the hope that one day God will send the Messiah in order to set them free. Many in Israel hoped again and again that God would intervene and save them.

The second reading of this evening reminds us of that hope which guided the people of Israel. All through the difficult situations they experienced, 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, their hope never died. They believed that as God saved them in the past, he will do the same thing in the future.

In that perspective, as St Paul says, 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 Jesus 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. In fact, 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.

But, why is Matthew doing so? First of all, we know that Abraham was the founding father of Israel. 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 God's gifts 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 is the feast of God's gift to the world and the celebration of our grandeur as God's children.

Second, for many Jews, the experience of exile in Babylon was seen as the result of the sin of the people. By invoking this negative experience of Israel, Matthew intends to present Jesus as the one who comes to set us free from the bondage of sin. In that sense, Christmas is the celebration of the generosity of God who did not want human history to end in tragedy. On the contrary, God sends his son in order to save us from sin and to break the chain of evil. This grace is given to all those who accept Jesus, change their lives and believe in him.

Another point is the inclusion in Jesus' genealogy of women, of whom some were foreigners and others less commendable. This mention is astonishing for a society that was exclusively patriarchal. In fact, the point of Matthew in doing so is to tell us that with Jesus all the barriers that divide people disappear. There is no more distinction between Jew and Gentile, 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 God's coming into our world and his dwelling among us. By becoming a man, God gives us an 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. 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. Merry Christmas to all!

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



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