

Christmas Vigil A/2013

The readings of this Christmas Eve describe the historical and cultural context of the birth of Jesus. They want to show us that, through the birth of Jesus, God has not only fulfilled his promise to send a savior to the world, but he has also brought great joy to humankind.

The first reading of Isaiah announces the dawn of a new day for Israel. It shows that the time of deportation and exile is about to come to an end. Therefore, the change is coming for the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. It equally shows that Jerusalem will take an aura of glory at the admiration of kings and nations as God himself will find his delight in his people. Finally, the text highlights how that change will affect the land and the fate of all the people in it.

What is behind this text is the idea that, when God steps in whatever might be the suffering of the people and its length, everything changes for the best. Another idea is the truth that God's time not being human time, when it is fulfilled, his presence changes the destiny of people and brings them joy beyond all telling.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel as it speaks of the birth of Jesus Christ. The Gospel starts with the book of the genealogy of Jesus by saying that Jesus is the son of David and the son of Abraham. In order to prove Jesus' tie to these two personalities, the book subdivides the history of Israel in three parts.

The first part goes from Abraham to David. It highlights in particular the famous people who have dominated this period of time that has culminated in the reign of David. The second part starts with the reign of David and finishes with the exile in Babylon. Like in the first part, it underlines the rich personalities who have crossed this period of time before that Israel went in exile in Babylon. The third part deals with the period of the aftermath of exile that has led to Jesus. Once again, it highlights the rich personalities that have played a big role in this portion of the history of Israel before Jesus was born.

Then, in a sort of recapitulation, the Gospel shows that almost fourteen generations of people were involved in each period of time that goes from Abraham to the king David, and from David to the exile in Babylon and from exile to Jesus Christ.

After that, the Gospel tells us the story of the birth of Jesus by showing what happened at that time. In fact, it shows that Mary and Joseph were engaged according to Jewish custom. Unfortunately, before they lived together, Mary was pregnant through the action of the Holy Spirit.

Joseph, surprised by the turn of the events, planned to divorce Mary. Just when he was so planning, the angel of God appeared to him by revealing that Mary's pregnancy was the work of the Holy Spirit. Finally, the Gospel shows that, as he was advised by the angel, Joseph kept Mary as his wife and gave the name of Jesus to the baby, fulfilling in this way the prophecy of Isaiah that says that a virgin will give birth to a son whom they will name Emmanuel, which means "God is with us".

What do we learn from this Gospel? On this Christmas Eve where our attention is fixed on the event of the birth of Jesus, I want to talk about the journey of God in human history. In fact, nowadays and in our country, there is a growing interest in the family tree. People want to know the history of the journey of the family, their ancestors, their

close and afar relatives, who they are, to whom they are related and how they have become who they are today.

By looking back in the family tree, people learn more of themselves and their family. They discover that the family is like a rich web which, over the years and through the meander of history, has mingled different persons in order to come to them. Moreover, people discover in the family tree very important persons as well as some less recommendable, like criminal, prostitutes, thieves, etc. But, all are part of our family and its journey. Is not that what human history is, namely a mingling of the good and the bad alike? We cannot disown our history; it is rather part of who we are.

As it is for human beings, so it is for Jesus. In fact, the Gospel of this Christmas Eve focuses on the family tree of Jesus. We find in it great people, but also less recommendable ones, like the wife of Uriah that David killed in order to appropriate her. And yet, it was from those people that Jesus came in the flesh.

Now; here is the question. Why are we told all this history at the birth of Jesus? The intention is certainly double. First of all, the Scriptures want to show us what a long journey, made up of ups and downs, God has made in order to meet us. The consequence of such a vision is clear, namely that God is not afraid of our failures. The ups and the downs are part of our human history; they cannot stop God's love to come to us. That is the reason why God has sent Jesus into the world, so that by becoming one of us and sharing in our human history, we too may become divine.

In that sense, we are not called to live in mediocrity, but to overcome it in order to be better persons. Therefore, we have to aspire not only at the best in us, but to give also the best of us in everything we do.

Second. By showing us the family tree of Jesus with its beauty and its ugly face, the Scriptures want to show us that God's love is bigger than human sin. Nothing, even ugly sin, will stop God to love us and to forgive us. Even when society rejects us because of our past and our deeds, God still loves us. That is why the words of Isaiah heard in the first reading are destined to us tonight: "You shall be called by a new name pronounced by the mouth of the Lord. ... No more shall you be "forsaken". ... "You shall be called "My delight", because God rejoices in you.

If you understand all that, my friends, you certainly realize that Christmas is the celebration of God's love to the world, a love that is stronger than human sin. That is the reason why we are here tonight in the celebration of Christmas. We are celebrating a great mystery of love that has led God to us in spite of our sins. Because God loves us, let us love him in turn by living, not according to the world standard, but to God's Laws. May Jesus bring peace in your hearts and your families tonight! God bless you all!

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



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