

Homily for January 1 2024

Solemnity of Mother of God

Numbers 6:22-27

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

It's about Christmas Presence, not Christmas Presents

The other day I was at the dentist. My dentist is a great dentist and I always enjoy seeing him. As he was poking around in my mouth, he commented to his hygienist how another Christmas had come and gone. There is the preparation, the anticipation and then it's over. That's when I put up my hand to speak. Out came his probe and I declare, "Unless you are Catholic. For Catholics today is as much Christmas Day (It was December 28th) as the 25th. In fact the Christmas Party goes on for 12 Days, until January 6th. Dr. Rempel said: "I didn't know that, and I was married at Sacred Heart Church!"

Many people think Christmas is over when we turn the calendar to December 26th.

"I have served my purpose. Now that there are not more presents, there is no longer a need for my presence."

As people of faith, we recognize that with the shepherds we are compelled to worship the Christ Child. With Mary we desire to ponder the events that mark this season. Centuries ago St. Augustine, put it so well when he wrote in a Christmas homily.

"Let us celebrate the festive day on which he who is the great and eternal day came from the great and endless day of eternity into our own short day of time"

As we ponder the story of "God entering into our own short day of time" we are invited to think about how God relates to us. We can summarize God's infinite and eternal love made known to us finite and short-lived creatures in this way:

God loves us so much that He made us to His own image and likeness; when redeeming us, He loved us so much that He made himself in our image!

This is the Bible's message distilled to its essence.

The Bible begins by declaring our very nature is a reflection of the image of God. God's purpose for us is that we would know his blessing and favour. So important is this truth that Moses was given instruction by the Lord as to the words of blessing Aaron and all priests were to pronounce over the assembly of Israel. It begins with:

The Lord bless you and keep you.

We read in Genesis Chapter One that right after the creation of the man and woman, the Lord blesses them. This means that he looks upon them with his loving favour and generous care. He

invites them to share with him in the stewardship of creation. This is how God makes us in his image and likeness. Not only do we share with him in caring for this world, but he has given us to capacity to be sub-creators. We have this wonderful ability to share in the gift creation. While God can create out of nothing, this is what makes him God, we humans take the very matter of this world and turn it into that which is beautiful, good and true.

Consider music, the art form most fully expressive of the festive season.

Composers take the sharp and flat key signatures, both major and minor, and the twelve notes of the chromatic scale to create music of such variety of styles and harmonic and melodic beauty.

Did you catch how many notes there are in the scale? Twelve. Isn't it interesting there are twelve notes? Just as there are Twelve Tribes, Twelve Apostles, the Twelve Days of Christmas. At the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21 and 22 there are repeated twelves. In the Eternal City, the place that is God's desired destiny for each of us, there are Twelve Gates, each with its own angel. The walls of the New Jerusalem are adorned with twelve precious stones. In the middle of the City is the tree of life with twelve different kinds of fruit.

Now think of the number 7. A mystical number, the number of perfection and completeness as illustrated by the seven days of creation, the seven sacraments, and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In music, there are seven major and minor keys on the sharp side and seven major and minor keys on the flat side. Within each octave of the piano there are seven white keys and five black keys. The black keys are grouped in twos and threes. Jesus has a nature that is both human and divine. May I suggest the two black keys remind us of this. God is Trinitarian. The group of three black keys remind us of this.

Is this just a coincidence? Or is there something about how music is ordered so that the very material of music, the scale, and key signatures and the structure of the piano keyboard join together time and eternity. Music, I suggest, shows us just how clearly we are made in God's image and share in the gift of creation.

However, we know that because of human wilfulness and sin this image while still evident, has been marred. Thanks be to God that in order to restore this distorted image resulting from sin, God in Jesus was willing to be made in our image. It is this theme that is captured in the second part of the Aaronic blessing:

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

This is the very thing that happens in the Incarnation. Jesus comes from the endless day of eternity into our own short day of time and makes his face to shine upon us. Paul captures what this face looks like in today's reading from Galatians.

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

Notice Paul celebrates how at just the right time Jesus was born of a woman. What more clearly expresses God taking on our image than to be submissive to the womb of Mary, the Mother of God? God became a child so that we could truly become adults.

What do I mean by this?

In Galatians, St. Paul says that those who are still under the law are like children who have a tutor. Or like Michael and Jane Banks, who have Mary Poppins as their nanny. He says that those under the law are like minors who although heirs of their father's estate cannot claim it as theirs. This is as far as the Old Testament can take us.

Notice Paul then says that when Jesus comes, his gracious face shines upon us in such a way that we can claim our full rights as adult children as we confidently declare God is our Father. At the heart of the story of redemption is our knowing we are adult children of our Father God. This means God has, through Jesus, brought us into a place where we can know our true identity. When we look into the face of Jesus who took on our image, we discover who we really are, those who share in the family line of Jesus Christ.

As this happens we can hear and take to heart the last part of the Aaronic blessing:

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

In English, the word "countenance" is a synonym for "face". While in the Hebrew it also means "face", there are secondary meanings better translated by the English words "mouth" and "presence". What comes from the mouth? Breath. Jesus, we are told breathed on the apostles and said:

"receive the Holy Spirit."

Our Lord said he would send the Holy Spirit to be the presence of God with us always. When we experience the breath and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, then with the shepherds we go with haste to worship Jesus. For it is always the work of the Holy Spirit to bring us close to Jesus. When this happens there is a deep wonder because our lives are filled with a sense of awe. Like Mary, the Mother of God, we choose to live each day pondering the wonder of the Incarnation. This is the beautiful truth: Jesus came from the great and endless day of eternity into our own short day of time.

With this in mind we can begin 2024 with a deep and abiding peace. This is a peace which Jesus says the world cannot give to us. It is a peace that we know even in the midst of great hardship and difficulty. This is because we know that in the fullness of time God was born of a woman in such a way that we are forever changed.

Christmas becomes those Twelve Days when we know the Father has blessed us by making us in his image. Christmas becomes that time when we celebrate the great festivity of the favour of God shown to us in the face of Jesus. Christmas becomes that season when we rejoice in knowing that Jesus' presence continues to be present to us throughout the year by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is why I was saddened when people cut short the Christmas Season thinking that after the presents of the 25th there is no more Christmas presence.

Today reminds us that it isn't the presents but the presence of God celebrated during these twelve days that really matters. I do pray that for each of you:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*