

The Nativity of the Lord: Mass at Midnight

December 25, 2015 12:00 mid. St. Augustine Cathedral

“Today in the city of David a Savior has been born for you, who is Christ and Lord!”

Of all the beautiful words written, carols composed, artistic renderings offered, and the other important details of the Nativity account we celebrate, those words seem to capture the most important part of the message: *“Today....a Savior has been born for you---Christ and Lord!”*

It was part of the message to the shepherds and the world that the Choir of Angels sang on that most Holy Night! The beautiful refrain sung after this morning’s First Reading by our great Cathedral choir and brass ensemble joyfully repeated that message: *“Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord!”*. St. Paul repeated it once more in our Second Reading from his letter to Titus: *“The grace of God has appeared, saving all...through the appearance of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ....”*

And on this very early Christmas morning, I repeat that same message of joy on behalf of Msgr. Martin, the Rector of our Cathedral, Msgr. Osborn, our Vicar General and Director of Vocations, Father Mathew Manalel, Parochial Vicar, Deacon Bruno Okoli and Deacon John Lohrsdorfer, and Michael Emmons, our Diocesan Chancellor, *“Today...a Savior has been born for you---for us---who is Christ and Lord”*. And I offer to all of you my best wishes for a very Merry Christmas and a Blessed New Year!

I want to extend a very warm welcome to any visitors from out of town----welcome to all those who have come back home from school or living in other parts of the state or country as you come home to be with your families for Christmas----and special welcome to those who perhaps haven’t been here for a while----How good it is for all of us to be here on this glorious Feast.

Gathered in this beautifully decorated Cathedral, hearing the gorgeous singing of the choir---the joyful sounds of the organ and the brass instruments, joining our voices with those of the rest of us as we sing those treasured Christmas carols almost off by heart, and perhaps most important of all, taking some time to gaze upon the precious manger scene here in the sanctuary----all of this makes coming to Christmas Midnight Mass one of the most special experiences of the year for all of us, including me.

We celebrate Christmas in so many wonderful ways: we decorate our homes, inside and out, with festive lights; we put up a Christmas tree and dress it with ornaments, tinsel, and even more lights; we send Christmas cards to loved ones and friends who perhaps we don't get to see very often, but with whom we are still very much connected; we shop for just the right gift for all the special people on our Christmas list. Perhaps some of you have already exchanged your gifts; some others of you might be planning on doing so right after Mass, or perhaps tomorrow morning as you gather with family and friends.

And of course, this is the night when all of us, especially the children among us, look forward with so much excitement to the arrival of Santa Claus when we awaken tomorrow on Christmas morning----assuming that Santa has made alternate flight arrangements for his sleigh since there's no snow!

But, I'm sure that we all realize that what we do here on this late night/early morning for Midnight Mass is the most important way for us to celebrate the essence---the central Truth---of what Christmas is---what it means.

Listening to these beautiful Scriptural Readings which tell once again what happened on that first Christmas, and celebrating our faith during this Mass which assures us that just as Jesus was born for the first time in Bethlehem as the Word of God made Flesh, so He is really and truly Present with us here in the Holy Eucharist---this is the meaning of Christmas, not just at Midnight Mass, but each and every time we come together for Mass as God's Ppeople united in the Eucharist.

I am very grateful to Santiago, our little first grade boy who carried the Baby Jesus in our opening procession and gently laid the Baby into the Manger. While Christmas *is* very special for children, it is not a child-ish Feast. It *is* a Feast that touches the child-like qualities within each of us, no matter how old we are chronologically. While some adults might get stuck on some of the questions about why and how God would come to be one with us, and one of us, in the Baby Jesus, the child-like qualities within all of us are moved by the simple, but profound fact **that** God came to us in Jesus simply because He loves us so much.

As I wrote in my Christmas card this year, "Christmas is the joyful Feast which celebrates the moment in human history when Heaven came to earth, and joined the two through a Presence that will not end until time itself ends". And just as Jesus united Heaven with earth, so

too does He unite us with one another through our participation in the Body of Christ, both in the Eucharist we receive, as well as through the Church of which we are all members.

But Christmas originally took place for a very important reason. Ever since the Original Sin had been committed by the first human beings, God had been planning for a way to restore the division that sin had created between us human beings and God. And so, the Scriptures tell us that “in the fullness of time”, when all had been prepared and at precisely the right moment in human history, God sent his only-begotten Son into the world. God sent His Son Jesus for a reason; Jesus was born on Christmas morning with a mission and a purpose. And that is what the Angels proclaimed to the shepherds and all the world: *“Do not be afraid....I proclaim to you good news of great joy....Today, in the city of David, a Savior has been born for you Who is Christ and Lord.”*

Jesus has come for the purpose of saving us from our sins. He has not come to condemn us, but to love us. Jesus has come to join with us in the human condition and to embrace us in the brokenness of our human lives; Jesus comes to be our Living example of how we are to live life as mortal human beings who also have an immortal soul. Jesus is both God and Man---He has both a divine nature and a human nature. And he shows us, who are human beings but who have an eternal destiny, how to live in this world as people of Faith---as people who have a perspective on life that is far different than those who have no faith, and who have no purpose other than “to eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die”.

So perhaps an important question for us to ask ourselves on this very early Christmas morning might be: have we allowed Jesus to be our Savior? Have we allowed, or are we allowing, ourselves to be saved? Are we aware of our sins? Do we try to follow Jesus' example of how to live our lives and make virtuous choices, rather than to give into the pressures of so many of the temptations around us and make sinful and selfish choices? If Jesus is not our Savior---if we don't do everything that we possibly can to allow Jesus to save us from our sins-- --then we haven't really understood the meaning of Christmas and the reason why Jesus was born.

As you know, just two weeks ago, Pope Francis inaugurated a special Jubilee Year of Mercy, and has asked all of us---all Catholics, all Christians, all people of faith, all people of good will---to reflect on that most important divine quality of God's mercy for us, His people. In calling for this special year, Pope Francis wrote this beautiful opening line: “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy.”

God has revealed Himself to all the world through His Holy Word, which we read in Sacred Scripture. But even more completely, God has revealed Himself by sending us His Son---the Word made Flesh---to bring us salvation. When we see Jesus, whether it's in this vulnerable Baby lying in the Manger, or in this broken Body of Jesus who died in the ultimate act of love to save us from our sins, or whether we see Jesus here in this Midnight Mass---alive in the Word that has been proclaimed, and in His Real Presence in the Eucharist to be our food and drink---when we see Jesus, we are seeing the face of the Father's mercy.

I hope that you will take some time this Christmas to gaze upon the manger scene, whether it's this one here at church or the one you have at home---and give thanks for the gift that Jesus is to you, me, and to all the world. Look at the face of the Baby Jesus, or the face of the Crucified Jesus, and "see" the Father's mercy and love for you!

But also, take the time to look at --- really look at---the faces of those you love----those in your family----those in your community----those who perhaps may have offended you in the recent, or distant, past---those who are marginalized by society's standards of who is important---those who are vulnerable and powerless. Look at the faces of your fellow human beings, and see the face of Jesus. And in turn, ask Jesus to help you to show them your love and mercy, even as we pray for God's love and mercy to be shown to us.

Christmas is God's gift to the world---the gift of His Son Jesus Whom He has sent for one and only reason. And it is for *that* very reason that we rejoice, that we celebrate, that we give one another Christmas gifts and enjoy the love of our family and friends. And that reason is summed up in the message of the Angels: "*Do not be afraid....I proclaim to you good news of great joy....for today...a **Savior** has been born for you, Who is Christ and Lord.*"

Merry Christmas! God bless you, now and always!